

There are no Second Chances

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/24901882) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/24901882>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Skephalo - Fandom , Minecraft (Video Game)
Relationship:	Zak Ahmed/Darryl Noveschosch , Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Dave Technoblade & TommyInnit , Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound & Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Zak Ahmed , Darryl Noveschosch , Vincent A6d , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Dave Technoblade , Wilbur Soot , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Skephalo , Romance , Time Travel Fix-It , Zak is a sad boi , yeah so everybody is dead , He's all alone~ , poor zak , luckily time travel exists , Happy Ending , just kidding
Language:	English
Collections:	Completed stories I've read
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-24 Completed: 2020-07-08 Words: 31,784 Chapters: 16/16

There are no Second Chances

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Cross-posted on Wattpad!

~~~

Zak is alone.

All his friends are dead.

The boy he loved is dead.

He's been alone for years, madness threatening to kill him too. He's giving up.

And then he wakes up, and it's five years ago - before everything happened.

Before he had a boyfriend, before his boyfriend died. Before he killed everyone that was important to him. Before the virus infected his friends. Before everything.

It hurts to see their faces. They don't know the future.

Zak does.

And he vows to change it. Vows to give himself, and Darryl Noveschosch, a happy ending. Together.

## Don't let me go

It hurts.

I stare up at the rain, wishing it could wash everything away. My pain. My hurt. My fears. My tears blend with the water as it splashes onto my face, soaking my hair.

Five years ago, a village was infected with the first stage of the virus. Blackening skin, slowly creeping up the arm...and then *boom*. The person infected had become a zombie. Or, close enough to a zombie that we called them that.

The thing was, the infection wasn't through touch. Wasn't through smell. Wasn't through a bite. Five years, and we had yet to figure out what caused the spread of the virus. Five years of people slowly getting infected...people dwindling...

And then it was just me. It had been, for over two years. I was alone.

In the clearing that centered all of the villages - I think there were seven of them, I'd lost count - there was a building where we all gathered once a month to talk and chat.

Now, that building was ruined. *All* the buildings were ruins. My home, Darryl's -

*No. Don't think about him.*

I blink the tears out of my eyes as I stand up from my position at the Meeting Hall's stairs. Around me, for what seems like miles, though it's really only a few dozen feet, mounds of dirt, some newer, some older, lie in the ground.

They're all here.

All my friends. All the people I'd ever had to kill, because they'd become mindless monsters looking to rip me apart.

I walk through them gingerly, noting some of the weeds growing on some of the mounds. I'd have to fix that eventually. When I found the time. *If* I found the time.

I crouch down next to the newest one; two years old exactly. With a shaking hand, I touch the shoddily-made tombstone. Once upon a time, I would be joking about it.

Now, I'm merely a shell of the person I once was.

"I miss you," I say softly, tracing the name that lies engraved in the headstone.

*BadBoyHalo. Darryl Noveschosch.*

I loved him, once. I still do, even though he's gone.

And even if the rain falls around me, I wonder if he's watching over me. If they're *all* watching over me. If I'll see them again, in a place beyond this world.

My eyes go to the other gravestones around us - around *him*. At Techno; Dream - Clay; A6D - Vincent. At so many more. Zelk. Geo. George. Mega. People I didn't know as well, but still blame myself for. Tommy. Deo. Phil. Wilbur. Preston. More. Many more than I can hope to count. People I've barely heard of, from villages far away. Xisuma. Grian. False.

*All of them, here. Because I could not save them.*

I put a hand out of my mouth to stop the scream that threatens to loose from my throat. I don't have the heart fight any more zombies today, and noise will merely draw them to the sound. If they were to come, I don't know if there was anything left in me that would stop them. I don't know if I'd *want* to stop them.

I can almost hear Techno chastising me for giving up. He, Darryl, and I were the final three. And then Techno was infected...and then Darryl.

Sometimes their voices fill my head. I can't stop it. I'll be thinking, and then I'll see them, and I'll have conversations with them before I realize I'm alone again. That's probably not normal, but it's not like I can go to a psychologist. Because they're all dead.

*I killed my friends.*

The others didn't have enough heart to kill their zombified friends. They thought maybe a cure would come around. They thought that we'd have a chance to change them back from their monstrous forms. They were the hopeful ones.

And now there's no chance. I still haven't found what caused the spread. I got tired of my friends attacking me over and over when I was making supply runs.

And so I chose to give them peace instead of the endless terror and darkness they were probably feeling as zombies.

I regret it. I really do.

But I couldn't stand staring into Darryl's eyes anymore. I couldn't stare into his glazed green eyes and run away. I couldn't stand seeing him as something *other* than himself...other than the other half of me that he had been before. I couldn't stand to see him as a monster.

And so I killed them. It was ridiculously easy, as none of them possessed their former smarts and skills from before. Which led me to believe that they weren't actually *there*, the zombies were just using their bodies.

And another thing.

Some infected don't turn into zombies. They die outright. I know Clay did, though George turned into a zombie. Wilbur did as well. I don't know who was a zombie and who wasn't - I just remember their faces, swimming in front of me. Angry. Always angry.

*Why couldn't you have saved us, Zak?*

*Wow, you're useless.*

*I hate you.*

*You're so selfish, not trying to find a cure for us.*

*You're not my friend.*

I turn my neck, my face twisting into a grimace as I try to dispel those nasty thoughts. No. They can't *possibly* think those things about me.

Right?

I stand up abruptly and trudge my way through the mud, and the forest, luckily not spying any monsters, not even bothering to wipe the tears that are sliding down my face. Every so often, I look back at the clearing. At the tiny mounds that speckle it, and the rocks that mark the place where they've been buried. Eventually, if there are other people around, if there are any less, they will come across this burial site. They will wonder who these people were that faded into history.

As for me...I will never have a grave. There is nobody around to bury me, or kill me if I become a zombie. There is nobody to mark where I'll lie, nobody to scratch hastily onto a rock telling a brief story of my life.

Unlike the others, I will die forgotten. Unlike my friends, I am alive.

One day, I will be infected.

One day, I will be dead.

One day, this world will fall.

And if civilization ever returns, they will tell a story of my friends. They will wonder why Zelk had an obsession with haikus, Darryl with muffins, why Techno quoted Sun Tzu, why Dream and George danced around each other, each unwilling to admit their feelings, they will wonder who wrote on my dearest love's grave -

### ***Darryl Noveschosch***

*he's in the sun, the wind, the rain*

*he's in the air you breathe with*

*every breath you take.*

*He sings a song*

*of hope and cheer*

*there's no more pain,*

*no more fear.*

*You'll see him in*

*the clouds above,*

*hear him whisper*

*words of love,*

*you'll be together*

*before long. Until then*

*listen for his song.*

*I love you. I always will.*

They will sit and wonder. But they will never know that I - I, Zak Ahmed, was in love with my best friend for months, and when we were finally together -

The world ripped us apart again.

## Don't leave me here

I know I'm dreaming.

I have to be.

"Zak," someone coos.

My eyes shoot open.

The first thing I notice is the lights are on. The lights are *never* on. It draws in the monsters. I didn't mind as much when people were with me. We could deal with it. We *always* dealt with it. But more often than not, it drew in people I knew. So I left the lights off. Pretended I was dead, just like everyone else. Sat in the darkness.

The second thing I notice is the person staring over me.

Not just a random person.

Geo.

I blink up at his face. "Wha - ?"

And then I realize that it's *him*, it's Geo, it's Spifey, it's the man who took away all my brain cells so many years ago - the man I killed, my *friend*, my *roommate*.

"Dude, you good?" Geo asks me, a curious look coming over his face as he holds out a hand to help me up. "You fainted."

I don't take his hand. I can't. I'm afraid that he'll fade away the moment I touch him, that he's another one of the ghosts that plague me. "Go away. You're not real."

Like the rest of the apparitions I see, Geo doesn't fade away. Instead, he pushes his black-rimmed glasses further up his nose from his crouched position by my side. I ignore him steadily, closing my eyes and praying he goes away. But when I open them, he's still there, staring at me worriedly. And the sky's a lot sunnier than it was when I went to take a nap. I can see it through a sky hole that certainly wasn't in my room when I went to sleep.

Where am I?

"You're staring as if you've seen a ghost," Geo notes.

"That's because you *are* a ghost," I burst out, glaring at him. "Go away. Get out of my head. Stop haunting me."

Geo raises his eyebrows. "Are you sure you didn't hit your head?"

I scramble away from him. That's when I get the chance to look around. That's when I finally see where I am. I'm in the Meeting Hall - well, a section of it, anyway. It seems to be empty, besides Geo and me.

Empty, yet clean. None of the windows are broken. None of the wood reeks of mold. There are no bloodstains on the ground, no food wrappers from snacks I had here.

"Where am I?" I ask, confused.

"What do you mean, *where am I*?" Geo demands, a touch of fear entering his voice. "You're in the Meeting Hall. You tripped and fell and you were unconscious for a few seconds before I woke you up."

I stare at him, and Geo stares right back. I blink a few times, my mouth repeating the words Geo had spit at me suddenly. I was sure I'd curled up in bed - alone - before this. There was no memory of me falling down in the Meeting Hall. "But you're dead."

"Okay," Geo sighed, running a hand through his brown hair. "I'm going to get someone who's better at treating - " He paused, and then gestured to me. " - that."

I stare at him as he walks off. The door to the main room slams shut, and I scramble to my feet, looking down to myself.

Gone is the armor that I usually wear. Gone is the sweatshirt - *Darryl's sweatshirt* - that I usually wore under the armor. Gone are the black sweatpants I usually don. I'm back in the clothes that I wore long ago - a blue sweatshirt, adorned with a silly face on the hood, and a pair of grey jeans. I stare at it, and when I bring a hand to run it through my hair, I notice it is shorter than usual.

And my hands are devoid of scars. I stare at my palms in wonder.

The door opens again.

I raise my head to look at Geo - but it is not just Geo who stands in the doorway.

His worried green eyes stare at me. I was wrong, when I said that they were pretty. They are *beautiful*. Tears well in my eyes when I realize I've forgotten the eyes of my best friend. I've forgotten the dirty-brown hair that he anxiously runs his hands through - a habit I've picked up on, I'll admit. I've forgotten the tiny blush that adorns his face whenever he looks at me, one that I recognize, now, instead of ignoring before I addressed my feelings. I've forgotten *him*.

Darryl Noveschosch.

"Zak? You okay?"

I've even forgotten the sound of his *voice*. I'm a horrible boyfriend.

What kind of nightmare is this? What hell have I been sent to? Why do I deserve this pain?

Darryl is dead. Geo is dead. They're *all* dead.

By my hands.

*I* put them in the ground. *I* killed them.

"Zak?"

Tears flow freely down my face as I stare at him. This is cruel. All of this. This is so, incredibly cruel. I have to stare at him in the eyes again. After everything that happened. "I'm sorry," I manage to force out around the lump in my throat.

He's at my side in an instant, like I know he'll be. I've forgotten how tall he is compared to me - I refuse to admit I'm short, I'm *average* - as he reaches over and draws me into a hug.

It's like home in his arms. I've forgotten how warm it is. I've forgotten what it feels like to be with another human, another person I can interact with.

I'll admit, it's been a long two years.

"What are you sorry for, Zak?" Darryl says softly. "There's nothing to be sorry for."

I burst out crying at those words. If only it weren't his ghost touching me. If only he were really here. If only...

If only...

"It's not fair," I say softly. "It's not fair that you had to die."

Darryl pauses, drawing back from me. "What?" he asks, a confused expression on his face.

This is the realist vision I've had in a while. Or ever. I can see the scrunching of his nose that he does when he's confused, and the little darker green sparkles in his eyes. I can see the sweatshirt that I was wearing the night before below his red and black coat. I wish *I* was wearing it again.

He smells like muffins. I blush at the thought.

"Zak?" Darryl questions, once again jerking me out of my thoughts. "What did you mean by that? I'm not dead."

"He said the same thing to me," Geo says from behind him. "I think he hit his head too hard."

"No!" I say angrily. "Stop trying to convince me you're *real*. Stop. Please. Go back to wherever nightmares come from." I clench my eyes shut. "This isn't real. Stop trying to convince me it is."

But when I open my eyes, Darryl and Geo are still there, looking even more worried than before.

"Zak," Darryl says cautiously. "I'm going to go get Clay. He knows a bit about medicine - "

"NOTHING IS WRONG WITH ME!" I scream, wincing when Darryl and Geo take a step back. "I - sorry. I'm fine. I promise. Just leave me alone. Stop haunting me."

I see a look of heartbreak cross Darryl's face, and I almost throw myself at him and tell him - *no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that* - but I can't give in to the temptation. I can't let these apparitions take over my life more than they already do.

They don't leave, though.

So I do.

I know I must look ridiculous - if there were people around me looking at this situation, I'd be screaming at nobody, hugging the air, and crying for no reason at all.

I push past Darryl and Geo, tears streaming down my face as I do so, my arms brushing his side - and I wish, *oh, how I wish*, that he was real, so that I could leap at him and cry in his arms. Even if it was just the two of us again, like it was in the six months before he died. Even if everyone else was dead - not that I wanted them dead - I want *someone* to be there for me, someone I can cry with. Someone I love as dearly as I do my own heart.

But it is not just Geo and Darryl that are haunting me. As I throw open the doors to the main room, I realize everyone I've ever known is haunting me.



Vincent is standing outside the doors, decked out in his usual gear - a black sweatshirt and dark grey jeans, and a white and black headband. He turns to me, a fathomless expression on his face. "I heard shouting. You all good in there?"

My breathing is coming in short gasps as I look around the room. People. Too many people. I see Techno talking to Tommy and Wilbur. I see Clay talking to George and Sapnap. I see so much too soon - it hurts my heart. I see Mega talking to Zelk in ASL - none of the rest of us had known ASL in the past before I'd bothered to learn it when it had just been Techno, Darryl, Mega, and I. I can see his hands flying, talking about some kid that was bullying him before he came to our village.

This vision is so detailed it hurts.

The loud noise of me slamming the door open draws the attention of everyone in the room to me. Everyone is staring at my blotchy face, at the shock that is so clearly written on it.

"You good, man?" Techno asks me, worry on his face.

*Ask him why he looks so terrible, Zelk,* Mega signs quickly, his board nowhere in sight.

"Mega wants to know why you look terrible," Zelk translates after a moment.

I stare at him. He stares back at me. "You're dead," I say in a quiet whisper, my voice breaking halfway through. "You're all dead."

"Zak? You sure you're okay?" Vincent asks me.

"I watched you die," I continue, looking down at the floor, tears splashing onto the spruce wood. "I saw you all die. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I couldn't save you." I look up to see their shocked faces, tears pouring down my face heavily now. "Is that what you want, so you can go away? Do you want my apology? You've got it. It's all my fault. *Everything is my fault*. I wish you hadn't died. I wish you hadn't gotten sick. I wish that I wasn't alone. I wish you were really here, instead of ghosts. I wish that everything was like it had been five years ago. I wish that the world could go back to normal. I wish that things hadn't changed." My voice cracks on the final words, and I cover my mouth to stop the sob that echoes in my chest. Wetness flows over my hand, continuing their path towards the floor, heedless of my block.

"He's *apologizing* ?" Techno says with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah," Vincent snaps from next to me. "For something that makes absolutely no sense."

"What doesn't make sense?" I ask blandly, wiping my eyes.

*You said we were dead,* Mega signs, looking up at Zelk imploringly.

"He said - "

"Because you *are* dead!" I shout. "You *are* ." I know I sound miserable and broken, but I don't care. It's not as if they're actually there, anyway.

Dead silence.

Mega's fingers twitch. *You can read sign language?*

I snort. " *You're* the one who taught me."

Mega stares at me. If a green scarf wasn't circling his neck and the lower half of his face, I would

say that his jaw was open. *No, I didn't.*

I move my fingers in furious tandem. *You did. I'm not that good at signing back, but you taught me before you died.*

"We're not dead, Zak," Zelk says sadly, his eyes watching the hand movements I'm making. "I don't know what nightmare you had, but we're not dead."

"It wasn't a nightmare!" I say furiously. "It was five years of that shi -" I stop myself, tears prickling my eyes again. I can hear Darryl's shout of *LANGUAGE!* in the back of my head.

Techno blinks at me. "Zak," he says curiously. "What year is it?"

I frown at him. "It's 2025."

"No," George says. "It's 2019, on the nineteenth of August."

I stare at him. "What?" I say, my voice cracking.

"That was some dream," Vincent murmurs from next to me.

I hear a shout from behind me as my vision goes black - and then the floor is rushing up to meet my face, and I can see and hear nothing at all.

## Stay with me, just for a little while

" - time travel?"

I blink slowly, a bright light shining down into my face. I just want to turn off the light and go back to bed. I want to burrow in the covers and wish that the previous five years hadn't happened. I wished that I was back in last night's dream, where Darryl had been. Where I'd seen everyone again, even though they'd been sure that it'd been 2019.

"But time travel isn't possible."

I sit up at the voice, and Zelk shrieks - I'm sure it's a very manly scream for him - nearly tumbling off the chair he's sitting on. Beside him, Mega, who is signing furiously, blinks in surprise turning back to me. *Hello, Zak.*

*Hello, Mega,* I sign back.

*No, G is* - Mega makes a fist, minus his pointer finger, pointing left - my right, his left. *You just said Meha.*

"Oh," I say sheepishly. "It's...been a while since I've communicated in that form."

Zelk rights his chair with a *bang*. "You've *never* communicated in sign language, Zak!" he says - or rather slightly screams. "Mega refuses to teach anyone, and I only know because I'm his ranking superior and I thought it would be best so he wouldn't have to carry that damn board everywhere."

"Language," I say in afterthought, a touch of sadness in my voice.

*You sound like Darryl,* Mega signs.

"Is this really real?" I ask softly, ignoring Mega. "Am I really here?"

Zelk eyes me, pity on his face. "Yes. Where else would you be?"

I shrug, noticing that the sun is setting outside the window. We're on the second story of the Meeting Hall - in one of the spare bedrooms. "I don't know."

Five years in the future.

Maybe this *is* real. Maybe that whole thing was one big dream. But it was so *realistic*.

"What are you guys doing here?" I ask them.

"Looking over you," Zelk says.

*Caring for the stupid head*, Mega says, and then his nose scrunches. *Oops. Forgot that you could read what I'm signing.* To be honest, I barely can. It *has* been a while. And Mega signs fast. He only agreed to teach me because we were both bored and wanted something to focus on besides our zombified and infected - and dead - friends.

But I guess they're not really dead, are they?

"Darryl is worried for you," Zelk says, almost in afterthought. "He says you said some confusing

things."

I sigh, trying to think up a lie. Anything sounds more plausible then *WELL, you guys all died and I've been alone for two years. Oh yeah, and I dated Darryl, so that's kinda confusing to see the face of your boyfriend after you quite literally stabbed him through the heart.*

Of course, that was just a dream. Or a mid-life crisis.

I smile sheepishly. "You know when you fall and your life flashes through your eyes?"

*No*, Mega says suspiciously, squinting at me. I choose to ignore him.

"Anyway, that happened to me, except you guys died." I cringe. "So when I woke up, I kind of freaked out. Sorry."

*Sure*, Mega signs.

Both Zelk and I ignore him. The blonde-haired man perked up. "Ooh! I think I've heard of that! Some guy got hit by a rock, and he lived out his entire life in the span of five minutes. Even had kids and stuff. Then he woke up, and he realized that he was still the same young guy who hadn't met the love of his life. He got depressed and stuff."

*Zak would never meet the love of his life*, Mega signs, rolling his eyes.

I squirm in bed and look away.

"YOU GOT MARRIED?!" Zelk screeches.

I hold up my hands. "No! No, I didn't." But I don't say more than that. I don't know *how*. I can picture it so clearly. I can picture *his* face so clearly. In front of mine. I clear my throat uncomfortably.

*But you dated someone*, Mega concluded.

I clear my throat again. "Doesn't matter now. He died in that...vision. Besides, I doubt he'd return my feelings. Or if I'd return his." I laugh, but it sounds forced. A second chance with Darryl? I'd snap that up in a heartbeat. But if that truly *was* a vision - did I like the Darryl in the dream, or do I like the one that exists? Is the Darryl that I liked the same one that was worrying about me? Do I actually like Darryl, or was that just forced feelings from the dream?

No. I love Darryl. Or, at least, I love him enough that I still miss him; enough so that my heart aches from the memory of him dying. The memory of me walking alone in the world, without anybody. Without *him*. Even though he's downstairs. I miss him.

This is a mess.

"Zak!"

I blink, and I realize that Mega is signing furiously, and Zelk is snapping his fingers, trying to get my attention. "Huh?"

Zelk points out the window. "It's nearly sunset. Do you know what's tonight?"

I blink at him, racking my memories for the 2019 August meeting. "Uh..."

*You're really out of it*, Mega signs, waving his hands to get my attention. *You've been talking*

*nonstop about Trivia Night for weeks.*

I blink at him. "Oh. Oh, yeah!" I put some false cheer into my voice. August 2019. Yes. Trivia Night. I was partnered with Darryl in my vision. We'd gotten fourth place.

It was one of the last happy days, before, in October, the sickness hit the farthest villages. We'd thought nothing of it then, but it had spread and we hadn't taken the necessary precautions.

"Zak!"

I snap my head towards Zelk.

"You're really out of it, man," the dirty-blonde haired man says worriedly, and Mega rolls his eyes. "You want to explain what happened in your...daydream?"

I shudder. "No. No thanks." I stand up, pushing the blankets off me. Mega and Zelk jump up with me as well, the latter nearly knocking his chair over and prompting Mega to elbow him. I pause in the doorway, staring down the hallway. "Do you know who my partner is?"

"Huh? Oh, it's Darryl," Zelk says, and Mega turns his back to me, signing something meant for Zelk's eyes only. The dirty-blonde haired man laughs nervously, glancing at me. I shrug, confused, and Mega turns around, no expression on his face - like usual.

-----

A few people throw me odd looks, but Zelk explains quietly - with a few haikus mixed in - what had happened. A few people even come up and mention how sorry they are that this happened to me, and that, *of course, things are going to be weird, you basically lived another life*. It was a little relieving, honestly.

Though, there is a bit of deja vu.

I slam my hand down on the buzzer on the first question, startling Darryl, who looks worried.

"Are you *sure* you know the answer for this?" he asks nervously, and I nod, refusing to look at him, pretending my attention is on the board.

Vision or not, it still hurts to look at him. He probably doesn't return my feelings in this existence, but it still hurts to look at the man who would've been my boyfriend in another life. He *died* in another life.

"Zak?"

I look up, a smirk on my face as Callahan looks at me. "Yes?"

I hear a few snickers from the watching contestants.

Callahan sighs. "The question was: How many bones are in the human body?"

This is the same question that was asked on Trivia Night in August 2019. The same first question. The same partner. The same person hosting the Trivia Night.

"I swear, if you say fourteen, you silly muffin," I hear Darryl mutter, and I'm seriously tempted, just to piss him off.

And I did say fourteen, in my vision. But now I know the answer - because Zelk held it over my head for *months*. "Two-hundred and six."

Callahan looks surprised, as he glances down at his notecard just to check. I feel slightly offended - but then again, to them, I am the same person I was yesterday, the boy who joked around about fourteen and ping spoofing. But I've changed since then - for me, it's been a few years. Even if Zelk says it's one of those life-flashes-before-your-eyes-and-continues-until-everyone-around-you-is-dead moments - I'm sure they're pretty normal - I *remember* some of those days. I remember those moments with Darryl, on the couch, staring into his eyes, I remember sign language with Mega, I remember sparring with Techno. It's so *vivid*, even if it isn't real.

"That is...correct," Callahan says after a moment.

People give me a few odd looks, as I high-five Darryl, cringing a bit when our palms collide, and hoping he doesn't see the look on my face in the near-darkness.

"What temperature does water boil at?" Callahan asks, and I'm just a *bit* late slamming my hand on the buzzer. Techno gets it first.

"One-hundred degrees Celcius," the pink-haired man says, fist-bumping Tommy when Callahan nods.

I snort.

"Oh, come on, Zak, you just got lucky with the first one," Techno says easily, grinning.

I roll my eyes at him. "You *wish*."

"If you wish to defeat me, train for another five years," Techno says easily.

It's *normal*. It's something he's always said - though, usually, he adds to the number when I lose a duel with him; when I was learning to fight properly, specifically against monsters.

But...five. Five. I *have* trained for five years.

"Are you okay?" Darryl whispers, looking at me worriedly, his green eyes shining in the torchlight. "You look pale."

"I'm fine," I snap, and Darryl jerks back, a hurt expression crossing his face for a brief second. I sigh. "Sorry. That was a bit harsh. I just drifted for a bit."

Darryl's face softened, and he pushed his glasses up his face. He said he'd always been self-conscious of them.

Wait. No. That's what Dream- Darryl said. Real Darryl could love his glasses.

"Is this about your vision?" Darryl says quietly. "You want to talk about it?"

I sign, rubbing my head. What am I supposed to tell him? *Oh, I dated you. We loved each other. There's a love poem on your grave where I buried you. I cried over you for months.* Yeah, that probably wouldn't sit well. "Maybe. It's just..." I pause, trying to think of the answer. "...it's hard seeing you guys again. You know...after you...passed."

Darryl nods somberly. "I imagine it would hurt. I can understand why that was your reaction." He hesitates. "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

I swear a blush adorns his face. "Well - "

My elbow hits the buzzer, and I jerk away from Darryl's face, from which I realize is a lot closer than it was earlier. I cough, and Darryl looks away, and I recognize that there is *definitely* redness there.

"Zak?"

I look up at Callahan once again. "What?"

Callahan seems to sigh before gathering himself. "You hit the buzzer, Zak. What's the answer to the question?"

I blink at him, racking my brain for the question he said he'd asked. But nope - I'd been paying too much attention to Darryl.

More specifically, his lips. I nearly choke at the thought.

"Uh...can you repeat the question?"

Beside me, Clay snorts, throwing George, his partner, a look. Callahan *does* sigh this time, looking down at his notecard. "What is Cherophobia?"

I smirk, looking directly at Techno. "The irrational fear of fun and happiness."

Callahan blinks. "Word for word. That's...another point for the Muffin team."

"Whoo!" Darryl cheers, his cheeks still tinged slightly pink. "Nice job, Zak!"

"Excuse me," Techno says. "But how does Zak know this?"

"Because it's literally the definition of *you* ," I say, trying not to be too hurt.

"No," Techno splutters. "I can have fun."

"While stealing presents from orphans, maybe," I say, rolling my eyes."

"No, seriously," Techno says. "How do you know this?"

I stare at him. "Because I'm smart." *Because I've lived through this before. Deja vu.*

Techno snorts, but doesn't press it. I *am* getting a few odd looks, I'll admit. The only reason we got fourth place last time is because of Darryl, not me. I answered one question correctly last time.

The next question is about poems, which Zelk answers along with Mega, his partner, who hit the buzzer and wrote his answer on his whiteboard. People sometimes bug him for not wanting to teach others his language - he even told Zelk not to teach others - but nobody really knows why.

He told me. He told me while he was infected, and he wasn't even one of those that turned into a zombie. I woke up the next morning, and he was gone. Then it was just Darryl, Techno, and me. Mega didn't like teaching others sign language because he liked being misunderstood.

I didn't get it, but that was what Mega said. He enjoyed it when people didn't understand him, for

some reason. It made it so he could basically sign *anything* at them, and they wouldn't understand. He could say anything and have an angry expression on his face, and they would think he would be signing something mean or hostile, even if it was just about princesses and cupcakes. Or muffins.

And secretly, Mega hated the fact he was mute. He disliked that others would have to learn a language for him, just to communicate. He felt like it was too much of a burden on others' shoulders, that they would resent him for it.

I felt bad for him. I don't think anybody would have minded learning sign language so they could communicate with him. Sure, Mega was rude sometimes - okay, a lot - okay, *all the time*, but he was still my friend. I'd jumped at the chance of learning ASL.

Blankly I hear Callahan's voice on another question - there are a few in between I've missed, I can see by the board. We're tied for second place, sitting at three points. Darryl must've answered a question at some point.

"What is the only mammal that can fly?"

Zelk hits the buzzer *moments* before I do. "Reindeer," he says proudly.

There's an awkward silence. "Uh, no," Callahan says, coughing to cover up a snicker. He turns to me. "Zak?"

"Bats," I say, with no hesitation. Surprise enters Callahan's eyes.

"That's correct."

Techno splutters as Callahan adds another tally to us, making us tied for first with him and Tommy. Darryl grins at me, and my heart pings. I half-heartedly smile back at him.

I wish that things were like my dream world. That we'd confessed our feelings for each other. Something pricks at me at the same time - people *died* in that world, and I'm just being selfish, wanting love. Even at the cost of others' lives. That's stupid of me.

But still. Another chance with Darryl? Gladly.

We end up winning, though.

And Darryl says the same exact words that he said in the vision - the same words that set off the relationship down its path.

"OH MY GOSH ZAK, WE WON! I COULD KISS YOU!"

There's an awkward silence.

Last time I'd laughed it off.

This time, I just look at him, at the small blush on his face, at the green eyes that glint with nervousness. He shuffles his feet when I merely look at him.

"I could too," I say softly enough that nobody around us could hear.

Darryl's head pops up, and now his face is *bright* red, and so is mine, but it's a reaction to say that, to say stuff like that to *him*, to my *boyfriend*, who walks again, after two years of crying by his grave. It's so natural that it hurts to not do this with him every day, to step forward onto my



tippy-toes and kiss him right now, to not have him gather me in his arms and to exchange kisses for hours.

Because I love him.

And once upon a time, he loved me.

## Stay with me, until my last breath

As the days pass, I wake up in the mornings easier. The past 'five years' are just a dream now, and I forget more and more every day. But history seems to be repeating itself, and sometimes I recognize things that seemed to have happened before.

Like when Sappnap fell into the river, and this time, I knew it was going to happen and stopped him from splitting his head open and being unconscious for two weeks. Or when Techno couldn't find his sword and I pointed him in Tommy's direction. Or when A6D was wondering what he was forgetting to do - take the baguette out of the oven - before his house caught on fire.

Little things.

But they change so much in my life. In *our* lives.

And slowly, I wonder if I really *did* time travel. If what Zelk and Mega had been talking about before I'd woken up and we'd gotten distracted by Trivia Night had been true. If history was doomed to repeat itself.

And while I'd been having fun with my friends again, and dancing on my toes with Darryl - both of us, especially me, making idle comments about things - I began to wonder if the infection would spread again. If I was doomed to watch my friends die again. That little thought took root in my chest, and suddenly it hurt to be around them again. Suddenly, I felt as if they were feathers, and would slip away, even though I knew none of my close friends would die until mid-2020. Even *that* thought made me wince - perhaps I could prevent this, all of this, from happening. Even other villages that we didn't openly communicate with. Perhaps I could fix *all* of this.

Then again, this could all be one big coincidence. I could tell everyone a virus was coming to kill us all, and if it didn't I would look like a fool.

"Zak?"

I look up to see Clay and George standing above me, from my position under the tree. It's mid-September, now, and I'm taking advantage of the fading heat and sunshine. "What?"

Clay sighs, glancing around and running a hand through his blonde hair. "We need to talk to you." George gives him an unfathomable look, and Clay glares at him.

I look between the two. The sexual tension is endless, and it would get worse - it *got* worse - as the months, and finally, years passed. Then Clay got the infection, and died instead of turning into a zombie, and George got depressed. He was the next to be infected - I think he was secretly searching for death even though nobody ever figured out what caused the infection - and he managed to kill Sappnap, who was trying to plead with him to come back, even though the rest of us had known that was impossible. George hadn't been the first to become zombified. Hadn't been the last, either. Darryl had.

Clay plops down on the grass, and George follows him after a moment. "It's about Darryl."

I stiffen. Do they know about the future? Do they suspect?

"You like him," George all but accuses.

I let out a breath of air in relief. I'm not ready to tell everybody about the future yet. I probably

should...but I can't. Then I remember that I'm supposed to be hiding my feelings for Darryl, and realize that I haven't been, not really, for the past few weeks. "I, uh - "

"It's pretty obvious," Clay points out.

I snort. "Yeah...just like you two."

Clay stares at me. "What?" George doesn't respond, glancing at his *friend*, his face tinged slightly red.

I raise my eyebrows at the pair. "Don't act coy on me, Clay. You accuse me of being in love with Darryl, and I'm not going to deny that - " No, he'd had enough of denying his feelings last time around. He should've remembered that Clay and George had done this, but he couldn't remember *every* detail in the past five years. It had slipped his mind. Of course, their conversation had been full of him denying it - he'd turned it towards them. " - but you yourself are denying *your* feelings."

Clay splutters. "What?" He looks at George for help, but the brown-haired boy is looking at the ground, picking at the grass. "What is he talking about?"

I roll my eyes. "Oh, come on, you two," I groan. "Stop it." I point my finger at Clay. "You think he - " I jerk my hand at George. " - doesn't like you, and will never like you." I look at George. "You're afraid of ruining the friendship between you two." I shrug. "Just get together, already. You two are worse than Darryl and me. Things will turn out fine." *Until you both die*. I wince, ignoring that thought in the back of my mind.

George's face is bright red now, and he's glaring at me, but I only stare back at him. Clay's jaw is open, as he stares at his best friend. I wince, suddenly, hoping that whatever happens is just like what happened in my vision.

Actually. I hope my vision *never* comes to pass, even if Darryl doesn't like me, and even if Clay and George don't fall in love either. If I have to give up the love of my life for everyone to live, I would do that. Gladly.

"You like me?" Clay says in a whisper, shocked for once.

George stares at him, and then gives a short nod. Once. He looks scared.

Clay laughs, startling both of us. George looks more fearful now, but Clay takes his hand. "We're both idiots," he admits, happiness flickering in his hazel eyes.

George splutters. "I'm not an idiot, *you're* an idiot," he says.

Clay only smiles, leaning forward. "I love you too, George," he breathes, and surprise enters the brown-haired man's voice, before their lips touch.

"Well," I say, to nobody, standing up quickly, making my way from that tree. "My job is done here."

I'm wishing that it was me and Darryl kissing under the tree as I make my way through the village, back to my house - or *Darryl's* house, I haven't really decided, when two people jump me from one of the spaces between the houses.

My instincts kick in, and I thrust my leg out, my hand going to jab one of my adversaries in the throat, my other hand reaching for the sword that isn't there.

"Z - Zak..." someone chokes.

Horror fills me, and I release Vincent from his near chokehold, backing up until my back is against the cool wood of one of the houses. Sapnap lies wheezing on the floor, glaring at me, the breath knocked out of him.

I forgot. I did it again. I *forgot* I wasn't there anymore, that I was safe. That I wasn't alone. That my friends weren't dead. And I nearly hurt Sapnap and Vincent, both of whom are looking at me with horrified expressions. "I'm sorry," I choke out, trying not to let the tears come to the corner of my eyes, where the clouds threaten to let loose.

Vincent rubs his throat, eyeing me. "Where did you learn that?"

I shrug, turning my head and dabbing at my eyes, trying to make it seem as if I'm running a hand through my hair. "It was just instinct."

Sapnap snorts, sitting up, grabbing Vincent's hand to stand on his feet, still rubbing his chest as he stares at me. "Man, I wish I had those instincts."

I stare at him. "Why, exactly did you jump me?"

A wild grin appears on Sapnap's face, and he grabs my hand, pushing me towards the entrance of the alley. Vincent follows him, grinning. "Look!" he points towards where I'd been sitting, before George and Clay had taken over.

They were still kissing. George was straddling Clay, now, and Clay was cupping his friend's - probably boyfriend, now - face. "Yeah. What about it?"

"We've been trying to set them up for *months*," Sapnap says, dragging Vincent and I back into the alley. "And you sit them down for one conversation, and suddenly they're a couple?"

I smile proudly. "I told them exactly what they feared that was stopping them from getting into a relationship."

"Yeah, that would do it," Vincent mutters.

Sapnap stares at me. "You did that?"

I nod.

"How?" he splutters.

"I'm good at reading people," I say cautiously, feeling the flash of the lie. I wasn't going to tell them that they'd gotten into like five huge arguments and a week straight of ignoring each other - each person thinking the other didn't like them, and hated them - before Sapnap set them straight, making them open their eyes. Of course, their relationship only lasted eight months before Clay died.

Sapnap sighs. "Well, only one couple left."

"What?" I ask him.

"You and Darryl," Vincent says.

"I don't think he likes me like that," I mutter. In all honesty, I'm not sure. In my vision, Darryl was in love with me for years before we got together - and Vincent and Sapnap weren't even around

when we did. But I don't want to jump to conclusions; just because this life follows the exact same path - minus a few things I've changed - doesn't mean that Darryl likes me.

Okay, that doesn't make any sense.

"What do you mean *you don't think he likes you like that*?" Vincent screeches, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking me. I stare up at him - he's taller than me; most people are taller than me - in bewilderment. Darryl hasn't really shown he's liked me.

"Huh?" I ask, blinking stupidly.

Sapnap sighs. Vincent rolls his eyes. "He is so in love with you it's surprising neither of you fell into each other when you went heads-over-heels."

"But he doesn't like me," I say lamely. Maybe he was in love with the old Zak, not me. I'm different.

Vincent draws in a deep breath, and I can tell he's trying to collect itself. "Look," he says, a bit more gently. "I don't know what's going through each of your - " He hesitates. "In Darryls' everlasting words of wisdom, *muffin-headed* skulls. You like him. He likes you."

"You don't know he likes me," I say, a bit childishly.

Sapnap perks up. "He isn't saying he *doesn't* like you, though. I don't think he's going to confess to anybody *but* you."

Looking back, I realized I was stupid when I was dancing on my toes with Darryl. But that was last time. I had been a stupid, idiot teenager with a perchance for memes. This time, I wasn't. Sure, I lost myself and laughed and giggled, but eventually, when I was alone at night, that faded, and I was just Zak, the boy who had lost his friends in a vision. It had felt so *real* - I was still tempted to cry just thinking of the graves.

What if I had time-traveled to the past? That would make so much more sense than Zelk's theory. I was experiencing serious *deja vu*. Constantly. All the time.

Which meant that the virus was coming.

And that meant that I had to put whatever feelings I had for Darryl aside. If I *had* time traveled - did that even exist? - then there were important things than love. I had friends to save.

I had a virus to stop.

## Hold me until I say your name on my bloody lips

By the time the October meeting comes around, I'm ready. I know before they announce it that this meeting will revolve around a Talent Show, just like September was a PVP Battle - which Techno won - and August was Trivia Night. I'm not surprised, by now, when it's announced that October's game will be a Talent Show. I already know what I'm going to perform.

Vincent and Sappnap haven't pushed Darryl and me any closer, or said anything about it, but they do give me looks. Darryl and I maintain our distance, even though I'd love to close it, I let Darryl have his barriers. I'll tell him when he's ready. If he's ever ready. George and Clay announced their relationship three days after they kissed under the tree, and they look so happy together it makes my heart ping. Just like the old days. Except - everybody died in the old days.

So when I'm sitting in the dark auditorium, a stage now making up most of the Meeting Hall, instead of making jokes like I normally do, I'm reciting what I'm going to say on the stage. It's the once chance I have to tell everybody what's going on, and who I really am. No more lying.

Geo, who's hosting tonight's event, comes up to me. "You're going second-to-last?" he asks me.

I nod, unable to form words with my mouth. I'm *nervous*. I'm an extraverted person, but seeing everyone in the audience - Zelk, with what I know is bad puns - Mega, who is going to write three words on a board and walk offstage - Techno, who is going to talk about philosophy and how it applies to our lives by making fun of us - more and more people. I know their acts by heart. This is one night that I remember clearly, because I know that the paper Sappnap clutches in his hands, that he is going to talk about last, talks about the virus in a far off-village called Hermitville. We'll laugh it off.

It won't be funny in the future.

"You're performing in the talent show?" Darryl asks me, startling me.

"Yep," I say shortly.

"What are you going to be showing?" Darryl continues, tilting his head in the cute way he does sometimes.

"It's a secret," I tell him, unable to snap at him as I stare at the stage. Finn is first, and goes online as Rose, the female version of him. I've tried telling him he wasn't straight, or cisgender *[forgive me, I don't know what I am doing with these titles, but we're pretending that Finn identifies as Rose some days (female) and Finn others (male)]*, but he was that way - Finn some days, and Rose others - until the day he turned into a zombie. And since he happened to die as Rose, he became a very pretty zombie. Because Finn can totally *pull off* being a girl. Though, it's still slightly disconcerting hearing his low voice come out of what totally looks like a cisgender female. He makes a few jokes that the audience laughs at, bows low, and leaves the stage.

I laughed last time, so hard that I nearly cried, and then I called Finn (or Rose) 'babe' for weeks afterward. Darryl had told me years later that he had gotten extremely jealous.

But I've heard his jokes before, and I only crack a grin at one that had last time made me wheeze for three minutes straight. Darryl is laughing too, but he keeps throwing me odd looks. I extend my laugh for a few more seconds, but I can't bring myself to laugh legitimately. As my eyes scan the room, I note everybody there. My mind instantly flits to their grave, and as the numbers dwindled,

so did the crowds at the grave. Some of the graves had been empty, like George's, because his body was zombified. I'd filled them up later, and it had hurt opening the empty coffin in the rain, the sun, or whenever I had killed one of my friends, and closing it with their body finally inside.

I had been the only one at those funerals. I had been the ones to inscribe extra messages into their graves, sometimes months - and occasionally, years - after their first ceremony.

Dozens of graves, surrounding Meeting Hall. Sometimes I would step around them when I left this place, and people would wonder why I was stepping around the air, when clearly nothing was there. Sometimes, my eyes would go to where Darryl's grave was, and I would be tempted to place a rose there, until I realized that Darryl was next to me, or back at home, or in the distance, with muffins, or whatever he was doing.

I'm sure he noticed something was off about me. Most people had pushed it off using Zelk's *you-lived-another-life-in-the-span-of-minutes* theory, but nobody had really questioned it. I think they were giving me a bit of space.

Finally, it was my turn, and when I walked up on that stage, everyone was looking at me expectantly, as if I was supposed to crack a joke or something.

I took a deep breath before I spoke. "I know all of you are expecting me to act ridiculous today, but I'm not going to do that."

"Yeah, you don't need to act like that!" Techno called. "You *are* ridiculous by nature!"

I glare at him. "I chose to go second-to-last because I have something to address of great importance." I hear people scoff in the audience, and suddenly I hate being the class clown of the villages. It makes it really hard for people to take you seriously. "You all think I'm being ridiculous, but Sapnap - " I point to him in the audience, and he looks up from the piece of paper he's scanning. " - holds a piece of paper that talks about a freak virus from a village called Hermitville." I raise an eyebrow at him. "Is that true?"

Everyone in the audience turns to Sapnap, who looks slightly flustered. "I - uh - yeah, it's true."

The stare returned to me, some bewildered, others confused. "We will laugh it off," I say quietly, though my voice carries throughout the entire amphitheater. "We will take it as a joke. Even as those messages spread, we will do nothing to prepare." There is anger in my voice, for our earlier stupidity that I vow to change. "In January, three survivors by the names of Xisuma, False, and Grian, from Hermitville, where this all started, will come into town. Two of them will be in the stages of the virus, one of them with two days remaining and one of them with six." I look up at the crowd, tears shimmering in my eyes. "They will die. One of them will become a zombie, and Grian will kill Xisuma, killing his friend-turned-zombie. Two graves will appear near the Meeting Hall." False and Xisuma.

"What are you saying?" Vincent says.

I look at him. "I'm saying that that vision I had wasn't so much of a vision." I point to Mega, who's quietly staring at me. "He wonders how I know sign language." My hands quickly make the sign for *friendship*. "He taught me." I nod towards Techno, who looks shocked. "You were wondering how I knew the answers to the trivia." Techno's face gains a look of understanding moments before I next speak. "Because I have lived through this before. The moment I woke up with Geo next to me, I've been living in a life that I've already lived before." I nod to Clay and George, who sit at the edge of their seats, horrified, hand in hand. "And you two. You wonder how I knew each of your fears for getting into a relationship. But you don't ask questions." I tilt my head to the side, ever-so-

slightly. "It is because I've heard many arguments from you two, screaming the house down at each other because you refuse to admit your real feelings."

Clay and George look at each other, confused. "I've never argued with him before, about love," Clay says, perplexed.

"It hasn't happened yet," I tell them absently. "And now, it never will. Because I am changing the possible future, and I plan on changing all of it. So that what comes to pass in *my* past will *never* happen, and so that we are not ill-prepared for this zombie virus."

"Are you telling us you're a time-traveler?" Zelk asks slowly.

I look at him. "Yes. I am. From five years in the future."

The amphitheater descends into chaos. Questions are flung at me left and right, and I don't answer them, just look up into the corner of the room, where Darryl looks at me, shocked.

When all quiets down, I speak again. "You think I'm joking. But some of you are putting together the pieces of the puzzle, and you are realizing that what I'm saying is true." I specifically look at Techno, who nods along with me. "By January, most of the world will be infected, and so when it finally reaches us, we are not prepared."

"And the cure?" Pigicial whispers. "How many die before we find a cure?"

I give the room an honest look. "Remember when I woke up and I thought it was 2025? Five years in the future? Remember what I said. *I'm sorry for killing you. I'm sorry for letting you die.* " Horror dawns in each and every face as they realize what had happened in my past, their future. "There is no cure. There is no answer. All of you die by the year 2023, and I am left alone for two years, until I appeared here, five years in the past. There is no cure, there is no answer for how the virus spreads. Those who do not die after the seven days become zombies, and I never find an answer. All of your graves join those of Xisuma and False, one by one, and with each burial, the crowd dwindles, until it is only me, standing there. Alone. And those of you who are not in the ground are zombies, and...and I can't look at you guys anymore, I can't see the faces of my *friends* turned monsters." I take a deep breath. "So I kill you. Your zombies. And those empty coffins become filled, and I am truly alone. Every day, I expect to wake up with a dark bruise somewhere on my body signaling the end of times, but it never comes. Two years, I am alone. Two years, I fight the horde of monsters that threatens to kill me. Two years and I visit your graves and I see your ghosts that haunt me. Two years...and I haven't found a cure. I never find a cure. I never find out what spreads the virus. I never find out what it is, or why it happened. All of you are dead, and I am alone."

Tears drip from my eyes as I picture myself holding Darryl before he died. I reach up a hand and wipe my face angrily.

"And now I'm in the past, and it's *not* a dream, it's *not* a vision, it's a possible future, and damn this to all hells if I will let you all die when I could have done something to save you." I look up at them, at the sad and terrified expressions on the faces of my friends. "The future is changing. That was a possible outcome that dwindles with every secret I share. Change it before we all die. *Including* me. I refuse to be alone again. Those were the worst moments of my life, and I will not bury all of you for the second and third times. I will not write poems of love and death on your graves, and I will *not* inscribe the years onto those stones. I have done it once, sometimes twice, for each of you, and I am never doing it again."

And with those final words, I walk out.



Leaving shouts and questions - and silence.

Silence, from the one person I wished would speak up.

Darryl Noveschosch.

## Tell me that you would be sad to see me go

*~Darryl's POV~*

The moment Zak leaves, everything descends into chaos. There is shouting, discussing, questions flying everywhere - but all I can do is stare at the back of the retreating boy, wishing I could gather him up in my arms and let him cry instead of seeing the tears hit the floor as he walks, leaving a trail.

*He saw everyone die.*

*He buried everyone.*

*He was the last one left.*

Those words are on a repeat of my mind, as I take into account everything that has happened in the past few months. The day he *time-traveled*, he woke up and saw me, and I wondered about his reaction. But it makes sense now.

For him, it'd been two years since he'd seen me.

I wondered what the future was like. If there had been anything besides sadness and death. If he had ever liked me in the way I liked him. If we had ever fallen asleep together.

If, before I had died, we had kissed.

*Zak doesn't like you like that, an inner voice chastises. He got Clay and George together, he would've gotten you two together as well.*

"Darryl?" someone asks me.

I look over to see Vincent, who looks worried. "What?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "Just thinking."

"About the future?" he asks me, no joking tone in his voice.

I shrug. "I guess." I point towards the semi-open doors. "I was wondering why he was acting more...down...than usual, since August. Now I know why."

Vincent plops down next to me. "Because we all died."

"We all died," I echo. "And he was alone. He had to bury us." Tears come to my eyes as I picture a crying Zak over my grave, Vincent and Clay in the background holding him up. "I wonder who died last."

Vincent shrugs. "Probably someone like Techno or Phil," he says. "The strongest."

I rub my eyes. "I...I just can't believe, in three years, I could be dead. *We* could be dead."

"Or zombies," Vincent points out helpfully.

I push his shoulder. "That's not helpful, you muffin." I shudder at the thought. "If anything, being a zombie would be worse. I could accidentally eat someone's face off."

Vincent snorts. "What - like Zak's?" He gives me a meaningful look.

I blush. "What? *NO!* Not like that, you silly baguette." Although, now that you mention it... *no. Shut up, Darryl! He doesn't like you like that!*

"Are you sure?" Vincent asks. He waggles his eyebrows. "I'm sure he'd love to cuddle with someone when he's hurting."

I stand up. "Ugh! Stop it, you stupid head! There are more important things to worry about than my crush on Zak!" Immediately, my hands clap over my mouth as I realize what I've said. I cringe, expecting Vincent to make fun of me.

But he just looks curious. Curious...and proud. "I knew it," Vincent says.

I give him a look. "How?"

"Both of you don't keep secrets very well," Vincent snorts, standing up as well. He pushes me gently towards the door. "Go get your man."

I roll my eyes at him, but head towards the door, slipping out and leaving the shouting behind. The words shut off with a bang as the door closes, and I breathe a sigh of relief at the silence.

Looking around, I can't spot Zak anywhere. I decide to head back to the village, and to the house we share together. It's hard to remember we're technically roommates when everyone spends so much time outside.

Most of the houses in our village is dark, but the door to our house is cracked open, a bit of light peeking through. I don't even need to reach into my pocket and grab my key as I open the door. Is Zak here? Is he feeling alright? After the bomb he dropped, he shouldn't be alone.

*He was alone for two years*, I chide myself. *Perhaps he wants some more peace and quiet that he can't get anymore because of his friends.*

I turn to go, to leave Zak to his rest, but a sound stops me. I frown, turning towards his closed door. It's around a quarter till midnight - late enough for him to be sleeping.

I turn the doorknob on his door, expecting to see him sleeping beyond it, or sitting up and thinking, but instead, he's thrashing on his bed, in the midst of a nightmare. I rush over to his side instantly, trying to wake him up.

"Nooooo," I hear him say. "Please don't leave me."

"I'm right here," I tell him, even though I know he's probably talking to someone inside of his dreamscape.

Zak thrashes once more, the covers sliding off of his bed. He nearly hits me in the face as he turns towards the sound of my voice, his eyes still closed. "You - you left - before." A broken sound exits his mouth, and I squeeze his shoulders. "Promise?"

"Promise," I say resolutely, even though he's not going to remember this.

But it makes him quiet down more, and I pick up the covers and tuck him in, ruffling his hair fondly and straightening my glasses. He looks so cute tucked in, like a tiny taco.

But tacos need toppings.

*Me .*

I blush, and move to pull my hand away, but Zak grabs it. "You promised," he whispered, and a tiny tear trickles down his face.

"I'll just be in the next room over," I say gently, trying to tug my captive arm away from its captor.

"Noooooooo," Zak moans, tugging me closer, surprisingly strong for someone of his stature. I hit the bed with an oof, and suddenly he's *too* close, and my face must be beet-red. Zak smells good. Smells like the wind that runs through the forest after the first rainfall; like pine trees freshly snowed on. "Stay."

"I - " I stutter, trying to pull away again. "Zak - "

"Stay," he demands.

I sigh, and tuck my legs under the covers, patting Zak's head. His hair is...fluffier than I imagined. "Okay."

He curls into me, his hand still wrapped in mine, the other tossed across my chest haphazardly. I can see a small smile grace his face from the moonlight that shines through a tiny crack in the curtains. He looks much more peaceful here.

Suddenly, I wonder what our relationship was like in the future. If he's safe with me, like this, he's certainly done this before. I feel slightly hurt that he hasn't mentioned it - then I realize he hasn't mentioned *any* of it until now, probably having taken Zelk's words to heart and thinking it was some kind of vision or dream.

No wonder Zak looks so sad when he wasn't laughing. I wondered why he stared into the distance, seemingly lost in thought.

It was because he'd seen us all die.

And he killed some of us, the zombified ones, anyway. How does that change a person, knowing he killed people who used to be a friend? He must've given up all hope on a cure.

But that makes sense. Zak was never a lab-science person; he was always the trickster, the jokester...and now...

I look at him, as he smiles peacefully by my side.

And now...the loner.

*I will not let that happen again , I tell myself. He will never be alone again.*

---

*~Zak's POV~*

It's nice and toasty in bed. I remember falling asleep crying, but everything seems better now. Even though my eyes are closed, I can tell there is light shining on my face, and I should *probably* get up - but my pillow is so *warm* -

"Z - Zak?"

I jolt back at Darryl's words, sitting up in bed, my eyes opening suddenly - it hurts, to tear the eye crustiness apart - to see Darryl sprawled under me. Oh.

His shirt has ridden up, and realize that I was using his unnaturally-warm chest as a pillow, basically lying on top of him, my hips halfway over his thighs. Now, in any other time period, this would be normal, and I'd giggle and go back to snuggling him.

Not this time.

I stare into his sleepy green eyes - at least he went to sleep - his glasses slightly askew before he fixes them. "I - uh - "

"How're you feeling?" Darryl asks softly, his husky morning voice *completely* wrecking the train of thought and apologies I'd been trying to take.

I blush, sliding off of him onto my side - well, actually, it's my bed. It *was* my side, but more often than not, Darryl and I ended up intertwined. Not now. Now...there are two rooms, and two boys who totally *aren't* dating.

Yet.

I clear my throat. "Better. Ready to go kick the virus in the ass and say *good riddance* !" It's my best attempt at a joke in times like these.

"Language!" Darryl yelps, giving me his best pouty-glare. It doesn't work on me.

There's an awkward silence while I stare at him and he stares at me.

"Zak," Darryl says after a moment. "You're from the future, right?" He snorts. "That's a silly question. Anyway, what happens to us?"

I give him a look. "You die, and I live." It's harsh but true. I bite my lip to stop from crying again. Darryl is next to me. He's right here.

But he's not *my* Darryl.

Or...is he?

Darryl shakes his head, smiling sadly. "No. Not what happens to me and you in the end...what happens to *us* ?" He points at my chest and then at his. "What is our relationship like?"

I force a smile. "You know. How friendly relationships are. We joke around..." *Kiss occasionally*. "...have fun together. Until...you know."

Darryl looks slightly disappointed. "Oh. That's all?"

I swallow, feeling the lump in my throat. "Yep! Why do you ask?"

Darryl waves a hand at me. "Nothing. Just something Vincent said." He slides off the bed. "I'm going to go get some breakfast." He pauses by the door. "Want to come?"

I shake my head. "Maybe in a bit."

For now, I am content to stare out the window and wonder how in the fuck I just messed every-fucking-thing up.

*LANGUAGE!* Darryl seems to scream in my head.

Oh my god, I am *such* a muffin head.

I mean idiot.

I mean idiot.

Gosh, those memes are coming back to haunt me.

I sigh and put my head in my hands. When Darryl asked me about our relationship - he'd thought he was being sneaky, but I'd known what he'd meant; whether we were boyfriends or not, I'd *freaked*. I'd assumed that he would think I was trying to manipulate him if I said yes, or that he would be disgusted.

Then again, I was literally cuddling him all night.

"Hello? Zak?"

I look up to see George and Clay standing in the doorway. "Why are you in my house?"

"Darryl asked us to speak to you," George says awkwardly. "I don't get it, why won't he just - "

He yelps as Clay shoves him. "Dude! They're having a *lovers quarrel*. It's blatantly obvious."

" *WHAT* ?" I shriek. "I - he - "

"Now, now, Zak," Clay says. "You're the one who got us together - " he motions to himself and George. " - it's time you got together with your man."

I stare at him. Usually, he'd have a comeback ready - like *I don't like Darryl like that* - but not today. Because those were the same exact words Clay said before he'd died. At least, to me. He'd had some more private ones with George and Sapnap.

"Earth to Zak," George says, sitting down heavily on the bed. "Dude, you good?"

*Cat's out of the bag*, I think wryly. *Minus as well tell them*. "I - those were the last words you ever said to me, Clay." Shock fills Clay's eyes. "Before you died."

"Oh," Clay says softly. "Oh, right." He sits down on top of George, the latter tossing him to the side in indignation. "And, if I may ask, *when* exactly did I die?"

I stare at the floor. *Clay's not dead*, I chant to myself. *You can save him. You're allowed to tell him how an alternate version of himself died*. "You were in the middle, I guess. Early in 2022. You caught the virus, and by then, some of us were already gone, and we were still racing for a cure, for *anything*, for any information we could use to find out something about this virus." I shake his head. "You passed a week after you got it, and you were one of the few that didn't turn into a zombie." I nod to George. "You'd been dating for around a month, by then, I think."

Clay looks horrified, his hand snaking out to clutch George's. "And - and George?" he asks. "SnapMap?"

I hesitate. "You got the virus around six months later," I say softly. "And we still hadn't found a cure." I let out a dull-sounding laugh. "Little did we know we would never find a cure." George stares at him, neither of them laughing. "But you did turn into a zombie...and you killed S - *SnapMap*, who was trying to get to, *and I quote*, 'The part of your brain that still remembered Clay.'" I shrug. "He died, you ran off into the night...and in late 2023 I killed you, and I put you in your grave."

"That's horrible," George whispers.

"Sorry," I snap. "What did you want me to do, let myself die?"

George waves his hand. "No, I meant that you had to go through that." He looks at me, his eyes full of pity. "That you had to watch all of us die until you were alone."

I snort. "Yeah, it was pretty bad." I jump to my feet and stalk out of the room, tears forming in the corners of my eyes.

"Zak, wait - " Clay starts, but I slam the door shut.

I can't do this.

I can't take this anymore.

## Tell me that you love me

It's Techno who finds me crouched by the riverbank, crying. "Uh - you good, man?"

"I can't take this," I sob into my hands. "I'm so stupid, thinking I can save the world. Save *you*. We're doomed to fail. Again."

Techno sighs, and I hear the rustling of grass as he sits down beside me. "What do you see, Zak?" he asks me.

I look up at him, frowning. "What?"

"What do you see?" he presses.

"You," I say, unsure of my answer.

Techno smiles, content, running a hand through his pink dyed hair. "Yes, Zak. You see me." He gestures behind him, at the village where he lives in, with Tommy, Wilbur, Phil, Deo, and Pigcial. "You see all of them too."

I'm just confused now.

"And four months ago, you saw...what, exactly?" Techno asks me.

"Your graves...?" I ask hesitantly.

Techno gives me a sad smile. "Yes. You're right. We may all die again, and this time, you might as well. But that doesn't mean you can give up. We have work to do so we can *stop* the future you come from. I bet you you've already saved some of us. At least for a little while. You are working your hardest to change the future, and that means something." He holds up a hand when I open my mouth to argue. "Perhaps the virus will win against us." Techno inclines his head. "But if that is so, maybe all of this was never meant to be. You were given a second chance for a reason, and you took it." Techno looks at the sky resolutely. "There will probably be no third chances, but second chances are better than most people are given." Techno turns and winks at me. "A chance to save the world? Count me in."

I smile at him, wiping the last of my tears away. "Gonna cure the virus yourself, Techno?"

He shrugs. "Perhaps. I was always smarter than all of you nerds combined." A tiny wink to show he's joking.

"Because Technoblade never dies," I reply, using his ring name.

Techno shrugs again. "He did in your reality," he says easily. "But he's not going to in mine." He holds out a hand and stands up, waiting for me to take it. "Come on. We have to interrogate you for details."

"We?" I joke. "Interrogate is a bit harsh, wouldn't you think?"

"Nah," Techno says easily, hauling me up when I take his hand. "Gotta beat this game somehow."



I was going to be honest, this totally felt like an interrogation. We'd gone to Geo's house, and he'd had a blacked-out room, a bright light to shine in my face, and a metal table with handcuffs I refused to enter.

"Who was the first infected?" Zelk asks me.

I blink at him. "In our group? Because Xisuma and False and Grian came in - "

Geo rolls his eyes. "Yes, in our group. The Hermitcraft group - is that what you call it? - were infected before they got here, and unless you got super close with them, I doubt they went into very much detail of what they were doing before they got infected."

I lick my chapped lips. "Can I have some water first?"

Techno slams his hand on the table. "Silence, nerd!"

I roll my eyes at him. "What are you, bad cop?"

Zelk tosses me a water bottle, which I gratefully uncap and down, some of it leaking out of my mouth. "I call being good cop."

"No," Geo says. "I - "

"You two are imbeciles," Techno sighs, shutting Geo and Zelk up. He turns to me. "Who was first infected?"

"Vincent."

A note of surprise enters Techno's face. "And you say it wasn't passed down through touch?"

I nod. "Yes, the Hermits - that's what they call themselves - ran into us, explaining everything, and that everybody else, I think there had been nineteen total, and now it was down to three, and they explained how it wasn't transmittable through touch, or breathing, or anything like that." I sigh. "False had two days left of her seven, and died. Xisuma became a zombie, and Grian - the third - ended up killing his friend."

"That's horrible," Zelk remarks.

"Yep," I say. "Good thing I've never had to that before."

Geo rolls his eyes. "Oh, shut up, Zak."

I smirk at him, pain clenching my heart before I realize that that life is behind me, and we're trying our best to keep it from ever happening. I sigh, and run a hand through my hair. "Vincent was first." My fingers tap against the metal table, trying not to clench my fists. "He turned into a zombie, and nearly killed me. We weren't thinking; trying to save him." I took a breath and let it out. "We learned that we couldn't spend the last moments of our friend's life with them; rather, behind a pair of bars. Vincent ran...and I killed him in 2023, like I did the rest of the zombies."

"What was he doing before he got infected?" Zelk asks gently, pity in his eyes.

"I don't know," I say shortly. "Baking baguettes."

"Zak, this is serious," Techno reprimands.

I snort. "I'm *being* serious, Techno," I point out. "This is the most serious I've ever been. All your

lives basically lie in my hands. If I fail, you all die. Again."

Geo's brown eyes softened. "Look, I get humor is your coping method, Zak, but please try to remember." He straightened his glasses in thought. "What was Vincent doing before he got infected?"

"Uh..." I say, closing one eye and scrunching up my face. "Well, two days before he was infected, we were looking for a cure for Xisuma and False, both of whom died anyway. We each split up to look for clues after Grian told us that it wasn't spreadable by touch, air, or anything of that sort." I shrug. "I know Vincent was responsible for looking for river weeds, but I don't know more than that. We were all too stressed with our own duties of trying to cure what quickly became a global pandemic."

"And...you're sure that it's not passed through coughing, sneezing, or anything like that?" Techno asks curiously.

I nod. "Sneezing and coughing aren't symptoms." At Zelk's pointed look, I clarify. "The first symptom is usually a bruise the size of quarter somewhere on your body." I sigh. "It spreads, and when it hits your throat, you start choking blood - and then when it hits your head, you die."

Geo frowns. "So, if the bruise were to appear on my face..." he trails off.

I shake my head. "It usually appears around the stomach area," I say, pointing at my own. "But it can appear anywhere in that vicinity. And you don't feel it until the third day, when it gets itchy and painful to touch."

"Can you cut it out?" Techno asks quietly.

"No," I reply quickly, shuddering.

"Have you tried?"

"I haven't, no."

"Then how do you know?" he fires back.

"Because you tried it," I say flatly. "You tried to cut it out on the second day, and when it didn't work, you nearly died from blood loss. That's how we found out you had it."

Techno stares at me. "How desperate was I?" he asks quietly.

I take a shuddering breath, and let it out. "It was...bad," I answer after a moment. "By that time, it was the last resource. Mega had died two weeks prior, which was a huge time gap in late 2022. You were scared."

Techno snorted. "I'm never scared."

I stare at him. "We all were, Techno. It's okay to be scared. It was only you, me, and Darryl left. We'd made a rule that we couldn't be with the person in their final moments, because the Sapnap and George incident could happen again." I see their confused looks. "Clay died, and George was the next to be infected. Sapnap got the idea that he could change George back from being infected, that it was temporary; being a zombie...and George bit his face off."

Zelk chokes. Techno's jaw drops. Geo stares at me, eyes wide.

I sigh and run a hand through my hair again. "Even though it was against the rules we'd created, I was there on the seventh day, with you. You told me to kill you, that you'd rather be dead with no chance of coming back than possibly killing Darryl and I, or wandering the world with a different state of your mind than your current mind."

Techno is silent for a second. "That sounds like me," he says after a moment.

I nod. "You were the first zombie I killed," I say after a brief silent. I point to his belt, where a golden dagger hangs. "I kept that knife, too. I killed - " I let out a breath, trying not to picture their faces. Not now. Not here. " - the - the rest of the zombies." I point at Zelk and Geo. "Which includes you two, somewhere along the way. And then I tossed the dagger into the nearest pit I could find, and buried it."

"So. River," Zelk continues in a sort-of shaky voice. "What about the Hermits? How did they die?"

"They were - " I pause. " - actually, I have no idea what they were doing. They got infected in late November, and throughout December, the nineteen of them got infected, except for Grian. He managed to drag the last two alive, False and Xisuma, and they ran out of their village until they came here, where False died, and Xisuma became a zombie, forcing Grian's hand. Grian himself became infected after Vincent, and died, not becoming a zombie."

"And we all died over the period of early January 2020, through 2023?" Geo says.

I nod. "Darryl died on December third, 2023."

Techno rubs his face. "So if we were to go to Hermitville, none of them would be infected?"

"The village north of Hermitville will be overrun," I point out. "But no, none of the people in *Hermitville* will be infected. They guard the pass north. Once they get infected...it kind of spreads. Don't know how."

"Well," Techno says after a moment. "Then let's go see these hermits and get to the bottom of this."

## and I will say that I believe you

Darryl, Techno, Zelk, and I stood outside the gates of the famous Hermitville, which stood at the edge of the mountains, guarding the pass North. The rest of their friends were back home, and had been given careful instructions to not go anywhere, or do anything outside of the villages. They hadn't liked it much, but it was for their own good.

"Should we knock?" Zelk asks cautiously.

Techno shrugs. "HELLO!?" he all but screams, and I clap my hands over my ears.

The gate swings open to reveal a one-eyed man with brown hair, wearing a green jacket, a short brown-haired girl with a pink cardigan on, and a girl I *do* recognize - False.

"Uh...hello?" the one-eyed man asks, scratching his beard casually. He doesn't reach for the sword that hangs at his side, but I can see he's itching to reach for it.

"We heard about the deadly zombie virus," Darryl pipes up.

"Deadly...zombie...virus?" the brown-haired woman asks skeptically. "The villagers through the pass disappeared, sure, but it's really nothing to worry about - Xisuma was the paranoid one. He's the one that sent the letter of the villagers." She waves her hands. "I'm sure it's no big deal - "

"Oh, it's a big deal," I interrupt. "This virus will destroy the *world* if we don't stop it."

There's silence.

False speaks up next, narrowing her blue eyes at me. "What are you talking about?"

I turn to her and smile tightly. "Hello, False Symmetry."

"How do you know my name?" she asks, drawing her sword. Beside me, Techno draws his as well, but I put a hand and push the tip towards the ground. We're friends here.

"I know you," I tell her.

"I've never met you in my life," she growls.

"Not yet," I tell her. "You haven't met me *yet*."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the one-eyed man asks.

I smile. "I'm Zak. This is Darryl, Techno, and Zelk. We've come to cure the virus."

The one-eyed man sighs. "I'm Iskall," he tells me. "And this is Stress...and you somehow know False, I guess."

I nod. "We need to speak to Xisuma. And the rest of you. It's very important."

"About the end of the world?" Stress asks.

"Yeah."

"I've never met you in my life!" False bursts out. "And somehow you come waltzing in here

saying you *know me* ."

I glance at Darryl, who nods. "I know you. From your perspective, we haven't met, yet. But I've met you - and I met Grian and Xisuma."

She gapes at me.

"He's from the future," Zelk supplies helpfully.

"*Excuse me* ?" Iskall asks.

"I'm from the future," I repeat.

"That's not possible," Stress says.

"Just because it hasn't happened before doesn't make it impossible," I say. "Now, let's go speak to Xisuma before all of you die. Just as you do in the future that we're currently trying to prevent." I glance at Iskall. "Especially you. You're first to die."

He raises an eyebrow. "You sure?"

I nod. "Grian told me about you guys. Architects." I peer past him into their village. "You have a nice place. I can believe it."

"You seem very...calm," Stress says slowly. "From someone who came from a future we all died in."

"I'm not calm," I tell her. "But you guys aren't dead yet. None of us are dead yet." I stop myself from looking at Darryl. "And I plan on trying my hardest to prevent that from happening."

"So...you're from the future?" Xisuma asks us, clasping his hands together. We're in the town hall, a lovely brick and granite building with black and white tiled floors.

"Uh-huh," I answer.

"And everyone dies?" Grian pipes up, crossing his arms across his red sweater. Everyone's here - Xisuma called for a meeting after Iskall, False, and Stress explained to him what was happening.

"Yes," I say. "My friends are dead by 2023, and you guys are dead by..." I trail off, thinking. "February."

"Of 2020 ?" Mumbo asks.

"Yep," I say, popping the p. "Grian, Xisuma, and False come into our village, and everyone else is either a zombie or dead - " I see a few winces at that notion. " - so yeah. False dies from the virus two days later, and Xisuma will have four days left. We'll be rushing for a cure, but we won't make it. Xisuma will turn into a zombie, and Grian will kill him." Grian's eyes go wide at the concept. "My friend, Vincent, will die next, turning into a zombie. Then you, Grian, and you will simply die. That's the last of you."

There's a bit of silence.

"So what's the cure?" Doc, a half-human, half-cybernetic creature steps forward. "What do we need to cure it?"

I spread my hands. "That's the thing. Everyone dies before we find a cure." I hold up a hand. "And before you ask - we don't know what spreads it, either. Everyone is dead by 2023, except me."

"And you came to us, because...?"

"Because you guys are the first ones infected," I point out, and then motion to Grian. "And he said that you - " I point to Doc and Cub. " - you two were apparently close to a cure before you guys died."

There's another bit of silence.

"Well," Scar says weakly. "That's...a lot to take in."

"Who's infected first?" Xisuma interrupts.

"Well," I say. "Iskall is - but you don't know that until he dies. To you guys, Wels is infected first. That's who Doc and Cub do their...testing on."

Grian pokes Iskall. "That sounds like you."

"Shut up, dude," Iskall mutters.

"And...symptoms?" Xisuma continues. I notice Cub has a notebook out, and he's scribbling down some notes.

"We figured out that you can get the infection, and it can be dormant in your blood for days, weeks, or months," I say.

"You didn't mention that!" Darryl exclaims, elbowing me.

"I didn't want you guys to know," I mutter. "Anyway, a bruise-like shape should appear around your mid-chest area, and it will start to spread. Once it appears, you have seven days. Once it hits your head, you're done." I hold up a hand as False opens her mouth. "No. You can't cut it out."

The blonde-haired girl shuts her mouth.

Techno snickers. I elbow him. "Hey. Don't laugh. You're the one who tried that, and nearly died of blood loss." Techno shuts up.

"So... we ...you...never figured out how it spreads?" Cub speaks up.

"Because it can lie dormant," I say. "So we never really knew how it entered the body. But it can't be spread through people, we know that for sure. We had a few...tests for that. Not through touch, or breath, or anything like that."

Cub blinks at me. "Right. So it started with us...we're building an irrigation system right now." He shuffles through his notebook. "And the village through the pass has a lake next to it, they're huge fishers." He looks up at me. "It passes through the water."

I gape at him.

Of course.

Vincent was responsible for looking for river weeds. Of course. That makes so much sense. I'd never liked water much, so I'd always drank from bottled water that Mega had stashed - that kid was so paranoid - and Darryl had been that way as well, always bemoaning about health and whatever stuff was in the water.

"Holy shit," Techno says, and I realize he's come to about the same conclusion I have. "You're smart."

"Language!" Darryl yelps. Techno rolls his eyes in response.

Cub frowns at us, Doc nodding by his shoulder. "How did you guys not figure that out?"

I throw up my hands. "We don't really have scientists in our village. Or anybody smart, really."

"Hey!" Techno protests. "I'm a *philosopher*. I'm smart."

"You quit college halfway through," Zelk pipes up.

" *You* didn't go to college," Techno retorts.

"Both of you be quiet," I say, the peacemaker - for once. "We have bigger issues than your schooling."

Techno mutters something that I can't understand, and Zelk snickers. Darryl smiles at me gently, and my heart does a flip as I stare into his green eyes before looking away. I look at Doc and Cub instead. "Can you cure it?"

"We'd need someone who has the virus," Doc says after looking at Cub. "Like one of the zombies in the other villagers."

Xisuma nods. "Great." He looks at the other silent hermits. "For now - no more working on the irrigation system. And we're drinking rainwater from now on." He turns back to us. "We'll notify you guys if we find a cure."

I nod. "It was nice to meet you, Xisuma," I say, hesitation lacing my voice. "You know...again."

"Technically, that means, in the future, I won Demise," Grian pipes up, a smirk on his face. Beside him, Mumbo rolls his eyes, nudging the smaller man. "Seeing as you guys were dead."

"Grian," Iskall sighs. "Demise was a fake game of life or death. This is *very real*."

Grian's smile disappears for half a second. "Okay, okay. I was just trying to lighten the mood. It's nearly November, you know. That means that - "

"That you have half a month before you guys start dying," I say. "That would be correct."

"Well, that wouldn't be my exact words," Grian mutters. "But sure."

Doc rubs his face. "Time to go capture a zombie, I guess." He looks over at Iskall. "You want to come?"

Iskall grins at him, rubbing his diamond eye. "You *know* I do."

"Just...don't get your face bitten off," I say, and everyone turns to look at me. I shudder. "I have experience with that."

"Sounds nasty," Stress says.

"Future is nasty," I point out. "That's what we're trying to fix."

"It would suck if we didn't," a red-haired girl said. The man next to her, a brown-haired guy with a giant @ symbol on his shirt, nudged her.

"Don't sound so sarcastic, Cleo," he said.

"I wasn't being sarcastic."

---

"Thanks for warning us, Zak," Xisuma says, when we're alone again, except for him and me. My friends went outside as well, and Techno and False got into a *really* angry conversation about swords. I wouldn't be surprised if I went outside and found them sparring.

"No problem," I say. "You guys are the smart ones." I run a hand through my hair sheepishly. "I'm just the guy that traveled through time."

Xisuma regards me seriously. "Look, I know you're kind of like Grian, and you joke a lot. But you're from a future where we die." He shifts in his chair, clearly uncomfortable with the thought. "That's got to raise some mental health problems."

"I'm fine," I say shortly.

Xisuma snorts. "Sure you are. You're obsessed with saving everyone. I'm glad you're leaving it to Doc and Cub - they're very capable people." He looks over my shoulder. "And if I'm right, that the brown-haired, green-eyed guy was your boyfriend - "

I sputter. "He's not my *boyfriend*."

"Not yet," Xisuma says, raising an eyebrow. I look away from him, unable to answer. "That's what I thought. I saw how you looked at him. I'm betting you dated in the future." He shakes his head. "You need to take some time off. Relax."

"But - "

"But nothing," Xisuma interrupts. "At this moment, you have done all you could." He smiles at me. "Go sleep. Spend some time with your *friend*. Have him become more than a friend, maybe. You're stressing too much."

"Sounds like you, X," a voice says from behind me, and I turn to see Keralis standing in the doorway. "Pardon me for intruding. But your friend - " He raises his eyebrows at me. " - wanted to know if you were coming out any time soon."

"Uh, yeah," I say, glancing back at Xisuma, who gives me a small smile. "I'm leaving."

"As for you - " Keralis says to Xisuma, as I walk past. "You need to get some sleep. If I know you well enough, you're going to be stressing until this global pandemic is over."





## Even when I know it is a lie.

### Chapter Notes

lol so I got a burst of motivation and finished the entire book last night -  
WHO NEEDS SLEEP?  
anyway, we'll be having daily updates.

Waiting is harder than stressing, I find out.

The main river that comes from the mountains; comes from Hermitville, is banned, now. We toss out all the water we'd gathered from it, and start using rain barrels. Luckily, as it's early November, it rains quite a lot, and we have enough water.

We get messages from Hermitville every two days. Doc and Iskall managed to catch a zombie, and they're doing tests on it. They haven't found a cure, not even a bit - but at least they're trying.

Which is more than we can do.

So in trying to get our attention off the current events, we've decided to host a swordsmanship tournament.

And because Techno had trained me in the months leading up until he died, I'm facing him in the finals. I know. Yay me.

"When did you get better-than-average?" Techno asks me as I wipe the sweat from my hairline.

"Oh, shut up, dude," I snort. "You literally told me on your deathbed that I was a worthy student."

Techno pauses. "I taught you?" he says, sounding dumbfounded.

"Yeah," I say.

"You were the only choice, then," Techno concludes.

I'm slightly offended. "Uh - no, there was Darryl. And Mega."

"Why do all of the incompetent people survive?" I hear Techno mutter to himself. "How long did I teach you?"

I open my mouth to respond - six months - but then I snap it shut. Techno *himself* had told me not to give away my knowledge. I knew Techno - I'd fought him many times before - but he didn't know me. "Stop fishing for information."

Techno raises an eyebrow, and then understanding came upon his face. "I hate my future self for teaching you that."

"Zak, Techno, if both of you could stop consorting with the enemy, that would be great," Zelk says from behind me. I jump, nearly slicing his head off with my sword. "HOLY - JEEZ!"

"Language!" Darryl reprimands from two dozen feet off, where he'd been talking with Vincent and

Sapnap.

"I didn't *swear* !" Zelk calls over.

"It was close enough," Darryl tells him, wandering over. I smile at him, and he smiles back. In the last few weeks, we've been poking at the barrier between friends and boyfriends.

I'm still not sure if he likes me, though. Maybe he's just really comfortable around me.

"Who're you rooting for?" Techno asks Zelk in interest.

"I'm the judge," Zelk says, sounding affronted. "I don't *have* sides."

"Suuuureeeee," Techno says, turning to Vincent and Sapnap, both of whom are wandering over as well. "What about you two?"

Vincent glances at me sheepishly. "Zak, but we all know you're going to win, Techno."

"Win what?" I say. "Who can die the fastest? Nah, Vincent, that was *you* ."

Sapnap chokes. Darryl's jaw drops, looking aghast. Vincent just stares at me. Techno actually grins. "Nice one, Zak," he says. "I *did* teach you some things, it seems."

"Hey," I say. "You *all* died before me. I'm superior here."

"Are - are we really joking about his?" Darryl asks quietly. "I don't particularly think this is something to joke about..."

"Dark humor," I tell him. "It manifests from the graves of your friends."

Darryl stares at me. "Good luck, Zak," he says, before turning and walking away.

I wonder if I've done something wrong.

Techno wins. But honestly, I was expecting that. I'd beaten him maybe *once* . At least he had to actually work for it, this time. When I finally conceded, there was a bit of respect in his eyes as he helped me up, me grumbling about unfairness.

Everyone had congratulated him, and he'd gotten to wear a paper gold crown with fake jewels in it. Techno had rolled his eyes and told everyone that the crown was like society - a reward worth nothing unless given worth by society itself.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, later that night, when everything isn't quiet. Something isn't sitting right in my stomach - and no, it's not the gluten-free muffins Darryl all but shoved down my throat.

An itch crawls up my skin, but it's internal, and I can't reach it.

The lights are dim, but I stare myself in the eyes, at my face from five years ago. There isn't a scar on my face, and there aren't scratches and countless calluses all over my body. It's weird seeing myself from before everything changed.

I've never been a scientist. Never been much of anything, really - a joker, sure. I've gone hunting a couple of times as well, before the apocalypse. But *who* am I, really? Who was I meant to be? Certainly not the person I became.

What do I see in my future?

Darryl's face flashes in front of my eyes, and he's laughing at some joke I made, and giggling, like we usually do, but there is love *and* friendship in his eyes.

By changing the future, am I changing *our* future? Together? I may have pushed George and Clay together - but what about *my* relationship?

Or, lack thereof *of* a relationship, let's be honest here.

I'd messed up when I'd told Darryl that our future was merely friendship. It was so much *more* than that. It was him and I versus the world - literally. It was the two of us, and all our friends, together.

Vincent and Sapnap hadn't even survived long enough to see us together. We'd finally admitted our feelings in early 2023, after Pigicial had died. The only people around to see it had been Techno and Mega; two people who both hated relationships.

Okay, not really.

But Mega always wrote frowny faces when we showed affection around him, and Techno always told us to go find a room. Both of them were joking, but it was hard to find relationship advice in a world crisis that that time period had been. We were so focused on the death of our friends, it was hard to be focused on each other.

We hadn't even gone on a date besides cuddling on the couch and watching movies that had been pre-recorded. What was *normal* in the future?

Normal was burying your friends. Normal was inevitably waiting to die. Normal was lifting up your shirt every morning to check to see if you were going to die in seven days. Normal was seeing your friends dwindle. Normal was seeing people have mental breakdowns daily.

Normal became being alone. Became visiting the graves of the people you loved, became an endless swirl of *how soon until I, too, catch the disease?* Became a wonder if people would one day find this place, and see the journals that Darryl and I had written, in an attempt to write our history down before we all died. Became piles of paper and maps and drawings of *us*, of what we had been, of what this virus had made us become. Become bloodstained and tearstained recollections of the memories of my friends, of the days and days we'd messed around, laughed together, pranked each other - became me. Alone.

Waiting to die.

No cure in sight.

Just me - wandering the world.

If only I'd drank the water from the river, I would've gotten it. If I had *stepped* into it - if one of the days when it rained too much and the river had flooded; if I'd gone *outside* - I would've gotten the virus.

One small mistake would have rendered me gone, and *this* past wouldn't have me. The future

version of me. Would have doomed us to have traveled the same past, to the same future, over and over and over.

Time travel.

Whatever happened, I knew that I would never end up in *my* future. I had changed too much - Clay and George were dating, and people were aware of what was to come. The Hermits wouldn't be building their irrigation system; they wouldn't be massively infected. Things were already changing.

And even if we ended up in the same place...things would be different.

Somewhere in my heart, I know there wouldn't be a third chance after this. Hell, this *was* our second chance - and it might not work out. Doc and Cub might not find a cure, and the virus might mutate and spread anyway.

God, I feel so *useless* .

My reflection stares back at me, that annoying grin threatening to take over my face. I hate it. I *hate* it.

### ***[Trigger Warning: Blood]***

The loud shattering of glass thunders through the house, and I jump back, letting out a *manly* screech as blood pools over my fist where I'd punched the mirror - and broken it. The shards of glass explodes everywhere, showering me in tiny, minuscule fragments of glass, a large piece already buried in my hand.

It *hurts* . I stare at the palm of my hand in wonder, watching the red blood smear across the reflective glass. It's...beautiful.

The scratches from the blood well up onto the floor, overflowing from my hand as I stare at it, making no move to tug any of the pieces out.

"Zak - OH MY GOODNESS!"

I blink, and Darryl's face swims in front of me. Is his face supposed to blur like that?

My hand doesn't hurt anymore.

"Zak!"

"Huh?" I mutter, swinging my head to shake off the fog. I'm tired. I want to sleep. Suddenly, taking a step is too much effort, and I lean on Darryl. My feet must've fallen asleep or something.

The redness gleams brightly in my vision. I stare at in fascination, until I bump into something and fall onto my side.

Someone is screaming.

They should stop. It's annoying.

My hand lies right in front of me, staring me down, *daring* me to remove the reflective fragment. Why would I do that? It's beautiful. It's *art* . It's *mine* .

***[End of Trigger Warning]***

Someone's shaking my shoulders. The lights flicker brightly, and I scrunch my nose. "Turn it off," I mutter. "I wanna go sleep."

"Don't you dare!" Darryl says, and I recognize his voice. It's beautiful. *He's* beautiful.

He loves me. I should listen to him.

"But I'm *tired*," I wine. I can feel his hands under my armpits, keeping me propped up against something warm. He's so warm. "You're a blanket," I mutter, my eyes flashing black.

Something sharp tugs at my palm, and my eyes shoot open. I'm not in that comfortable position anymore - I'm lying on my back, and someone is holding my shoulders down as I thrash. Whatever this person is doing *hurts*.

Tiny pinpricks all over my arms, and a bit on my face. I'm trying to throw them off.

Screams and shouts I can't understand. Someone screaming to shut up, a bit of quiet as my vision fades black.

Someone whispering in my ear.

" - love you, Zak. I *love* you. I've loved you for months."

I wonder who's saying that. Certainly not Darryl. He doesn't like me like that. "Sorry," I slur. "Can't love you back. I love someone else."

There's a bit of silence, and I wince from yet *another* pinprick, this one in the corner of my arm.

"Who?" someone asks in such a soft voice.

Sounds like Darryl.

But it can't be.

Even though my eyes are closed, I smile. "Darryl Noveschosch. But he doesn't like me back." I crack open my eye to see a blurry figure above my head, blocking out the white lights. "We dated...future....you know." I miss some of the words, unable to remember them. "I...love...him."

And even as my vision fades, I swear I can hear someone say -

"Love you too, Zak."

## Because I need this lie right now.

My hand throbs me into awareness, and I crack open my eyes to see that the shutters on my window haven't been closed properly, and now the early morning sun is streaming on my face.

I groan, and attempt to roll closer to shut the light off, but two hands tighten around my waist, and I freeze.

"Zak?" says a quiet voice. Darryl.

Last night comes flooding back to me. Me punching a mirror - there's now a huge bandage around my palm - Darryl finding me - me *confessing my feelings to him* -

My face goes bright red. "Uh - why are you in my room?" I fumble out, scooting away from him. Or attempting to. Darryl's hands tighten once more against my waist, and I'm too tired to fight against his warmth.

"This is *my* room, actually," he replies dryly.

"I - uh - " I say, tripping over my words.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" Darryl interrupts, getting straight to the point.

I go quiet. Too quiet for too long.

"Nevermind," Darryl mutters, and his arms recede from me, his warmth disappearing. I can hear him getting out of bed.

I flounder, rolling over, ignoring the stab of pain in my left hand. "Darryl - wait."

"No - it was stupid," Darryl says, sitting on the edge of bed, turning to face me, his green eyes swimming with tears. "You were - I doubt you even remember." He gets up to go.

"I love you, Darryl."

Time seems to freeze. I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth. He stares at me, and I stare at him.

Oh my god, I can't believe I just said that.

He blinks at me, his face turning bright red, mirroring mine.

"I love you too, Zak," he says breathlessly.

"I know," I say honestly, sitting up next to him and leaning my head on his shoulder. "I know."

"We did date in the future, didn't we?" Darryl asks after a moment.

I move to nod, but with my head on his shoulder, it doesn't really work out. "Yes," I say instead. "Years in the future, though."

Darryl is silent. "I was afraid," he replies finally. "That we would ruin our friendship." He chuckles. "We were both muffin heads."

"Hey," I say, acting offended. "You were the one that died, not me. You ruined the relationship."

Darryl stares at me. "Uh - sure, Zak. I don't think that's how it works, though."

We stare at each other for a few seconds.

And then I tilt my head up and kiss him.

Darryl's hands wrap around the back of my head and bring me closer, tilting my head up. It's exactly like I remembered - and so much more. *So much more*. So much better. It's *him*.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Darryl and I break apart with a gasp from him, and I turn and glare at the person that ruined the best thing that had happened to me in *years* - besides the whole time-travel thing.

It's Techno.

He raises an eyebrow at me as he leans against the doorway. "I was just checking to see if you were still alive, nerd. You know, after the mirror attacked you."

"I punched it," I reply blithely.

"Yeah, well, I'm *sure* it provoked you first," Techno replies, raising his eyebrows at Darryl, who's blushing hardcore next to me. "So. I take it you two are a thing now?"

"I - "

"Yes," Darryl interrupts. He smiles shyly down at me, and I grin back. "Yep, we are."

Techno snickers. "I win that bet."

"Wait, what?" Darryl asks, always the oblivious little muffin. I roll my eyes, a happy grin on my face.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Techno asks. "Dude, the entire *village* knew about the *obvious* sexual tension between you two. I bet Vincent that you two would get together before the end of the year." He laughs again. "He owes me twenty dollars."

Darryl turns to me. "Did you know about that?"

I sigh. "Well - technically speaking, no. I didn't. I do *now*, because the moment we started dating in the future - my past - Techno spilled the beans about the bet he'd lost to Vincent in 2020."

"He was dead, I'm hoping I didn't have to pay him?" Techno pipes in.

Darryl's jaw drops. I snicker. "You did, actually," I say. "You tucked it into his grave. The nicest thing I've ever seen you do."

"Yeah, fair enough," Techno says. "Now, I gotta go collect the money from the other losers that thought you guys would be too chicken to get together."

"Hey!" I call after him as he leaves the doorframe. "You lost the bets between George and Clay! You're not *gaining* any money!"

"Yeah!" he calls back. "Because you messed with the past." He pops back into the doorframe,



glaring daggers at me. "I'm sure I won the bet in the future."

I shrug. He's not wrong. Techno rolls his eyes at me and leaves the doorway. I can hear the front door slamming. It's funny - because I don't remember it opening. Guess Darryl and I were a bit conflicted at the moment.

"That was...odd," Darryl says finally, turning back to me.

I smile at him, and in answer, I kiss him again.

---

"What was my reaction when you guys started dating last time around?" Vincent asks me as I lick at a popsicle.

"You died first, remember?" I say. "Though I'm sure you were rolling in your grave."

Vincent goes quiet. "I'm never collecting river weeds again," he says finally.

I go to agree with him, but a stabbing pain fills my chest, and I drop my popsicle onto the grass where I'm relaxing on one of the few sunny days left of the year.

"You good?" Vincent asks me, eyeing my hand, where he assumes the pain is coming from.

"I - " I gasp, wincing from yet another stab of pain filling my chest. "I need - I need to go to the bathroom." I get to my feet, nearly falling from yet *another* stab of pain that racks my body. Vincent stands up as well, looking worried, but I wave him down. "No - I'm fine. Just a bit of pain from the stupid mirror." I wave my hand, forcing a grin onto his face.

The black-haired man still looks worried, but he still sits down as I stumble back into my house, and down into the second bathroom. My bathroom has mirror shards everywhere, and is currently under repair.

I catch myself on the vanity, gasping as I touch the spot where Clay put stitches into my palm. Wrong place to grab. I look up into the mirror, and see the pale look on my face.

Horror fills me, and before I have time to react, I lean over and throw up in the toiler, flushing it quickly.

I know what this is.

With trembling hands, I drag up my sweatshirt to reveal my midriff.

And there, on the left side of my stomach, is a black spot the size of my fist. I must not have noticed it yesterday.

Immediately anger fills me. How *dare* it? How *dare* the virus lie dormant until the *one time* I'm happy? How *dare* it? I'm *furios*. My arms shake as I stare at the black spot on my stomach. I can see the faint purple and green veins pulsing above the spot.

Movement catches in my vision, and I release the sweatshirt. In the mirror, I catch Mega's eyes.

I spin towards him, and I can see by the look on his face that he's seen it.

*Is that ...?* he signs quickly, his eyes darting back to my stomach.

I don't want anyone else to hear. *Yes*, I sign back, and I can feel tears overflowing from my face. *Please don't tell anybody*.

For the first time in months, I see Mega's eyes fill with compassion. *Are you going to die?* he signs slowly, each word carefully orchestrated.

My hands shake as I sign my next words. *Probably*.

Mega's arms drop to his side, and he stares at me with brown eyes. Perhaps I can see a bit of tears in them. I've only seen him cry once - at Zelk's funeral - or fake funeral, since Zelk got turned into a zombie. Slowly, he brings his hands back up to sign some more words. *How long?*

My hands twitch as I sign back. *Five days*.

I can tell by the size of it. If I'm lucky, six days. If I'm unlucky, four.

Mega's head twitches. *What are you going to do?*

I wipe the tears away with my left hand, groaning as pain sparks through my chest once more. *I - I don't know*.

*There has to be a cure*, Mega signs angrily. *You have to go to Hermitville. Make them work faster*.

"It doesn't work like that," I say softly. "I can't make them work faster."

"Zak? Mega? What are you doing here?"

I look over Mega's shoulder to see Darryl standing there, his face filled with curiosity. What am I supposed to tell him? Our roles are switched, now.

I'm going to die.

"Mega and I were just talking about - " I say, stopping and fumbling for an answer. "About - "

Mega is silent, staring at me. I'm about to tell him to chime in, but then I remember he can't talk. And Darryl can't understand sign language. I laugh nervously. "I've been - uh - messing up in sign language, and Mega's being a bully and wants me to work faster."

*Tell him, you jerk*, Mega's fingers say, his brows furrowed, portraying anger. *He's your boyfriend*.

I'm so very glad that Mega doesn't have his board right now. I laugh again. "See? He's so mean to me."

"What did he say?" Darryl says in interest.

"Oh, he said that I was a little boy," I shrug, forcing the smile to remain on my face. "You know, the usual shit."

"Language!" Darryl reminds, and I have to stop from closing my eyes and letting the tears overflow from my eyes. He turns to Mega. "As for you, you little muffin, don't call people names!"

*Darryl, Zak is dying* , Mega signs.

"What did he say?" Darryl questions me.

"He told you to SHUT UP," I say, glaring the last words at Mega, who ignores me.

"That's not very nice," Darryl says with a frown.

*I did not say that* , Mega complains.

"He said that you're not very nice," I continue, ignoring the death stare Mega is now throwing me.

"I agree. Mega, you're not very nice. You should *shut up* before something bad happens." I look at him meaningfully. "I - I've got to go. Eat a popsicle."

"We have popsicles - wait - Zak - " Darryl calls after me as I all but push past him and *run* out the door, tears flowing down my face. I see Vincent stand up as I run by him, and George and Geo look up from what seems to be a debate to scream questions at me.

I don't answer.

What am I supposed to say?

## Just so I can take my last breath

My friends probably think that I'm wandering in the forest.

Instead, I can see the gates of Hermitville in the distance. I have to come here. Doc and Cub might have a cure - or the beginning of one, anyway. I'm about to go up the gate and demand entry, when I hear someone retching by the river that flows nearby.

*[Slight Trigger Warning: Vomiting]*

I see a brown-haired girl curling up by the riverbank, her pink cardigan stained with throw-up and blood, more leaking into the river. Her big brown eyes squeeze shut as she retches once again, tugging her hair away from her face as she throws up again.

*[Trigger warning ended]*

As I walk towards her, a stick under me cracks, and the girl turns, her eyes bloodshot, tears leaking down her face. She's pale, and clutching at her stomach under her shirt. "Z - Zak?" she says in a breathy whisper. "What - what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be - back in your - your village?"

I tuck my hands into my sweatshirt pockets, noticing the fear in her eyes. "You have the virus, don't you?"

"I - no - " Stress says, gulping, her eyes once more filling with tears.

In response, I lift up my shirt to reveal the spot, and Stress starts sobbing. "I'm going to die," she says, her hand covering her mouth. "I'm going to *die* , aren't I?"

"No," I say. Stress gives me a look. "Okay, possibly. How far along are you?"

Stress lifts up her shirt to reveal a black spot that's just around as big as mine, though it's on the side of her hip.

"What are the chances," I whisper. "That we're mere *hours* of each other?"

Stress looks at me with her brown eyes, biting her lip so she doesn't sob. "What - what do we *do* ?" she asks. "Doc and Cub don't have a cure yet - "

I grab her hand and pull her to her feet. "We have five days. People work miracles in less." I mean, maybe not find a cure for a zombie apocalypse disease - but you know. *Maybe* . Stress lands unsteadily, looking as if she's about to hurl again. "Do the others know?"

"No," Stress whispers, looking at her feet. "I found out about it last night." Seeing as it's nearly sunset again - that's twenty-four hours ago.

I groan. "I found out about an hour ago."

She gives me a look. "How could you not notice?"

I smile sheepishly. "I punched a mirror and had to be given stitches." I hold up my left, bandaged hand. "I was kind of out of it." My smile falters. "And I was...busy with my...boyfriend."

Stress looks at her feet. "I'm so sorry, Zak," she says softly.

"It's okay," I reply. "We're going to get through this. We're sick buddies now." Stress snorts, but we start walking towards the gate. "They have actual people they can test on, not just a zombie now."

"Wonderful," Stress says. "Great."

"No need to sound so excited," I tease. But even my great sense of humor can't compare to the weight on our shoulders. Stress goes silent, and even my smile fades, even as we reach the front entrance. It swings open without even having to shout - and Iskall is waiting there, his hand on his sword.

"Where have you been?" he demands. "We've been looking for you all day!"

I give Stress a look, open my mouth to explain - but Stress bursts into tears. "I'm going to *die* !" she shrieks.

Iskall's eyes widen, and he's next to her in an instant, soothing her. "Woah, woah, woah - you're not going to die."

Stress lifts up the side of her shirt to reveal the bruised infection on her side, tears leaking down her face. Iskall goes *absolutely* still. I can see the horror in his eyes - eye - as he looks up at me. "Is that...?" he whispers.

In answer, I pull up my own shirt as well, and his eyes zero in on the bruise on my stomach; a tiny bit smaller than his friends'. Stress clings to Iskall, breathing hard.

"How long?" Iskall asks.

"Five days," I answer. "Perhaps more, if we're lucky."

Iskall closes his single eye, pain evident on his face. "GOD DAMNIT!" he yells, scaring Stress.

"Language," I mutter.

"We're going," Iskall says, leading Stress down the road. "The lab is this way."

I follow him dutifully down the streets. I see some curious heads poke out, but some weird stuff must happen in this village, because nobody really comes out of their homes, or whatever they're doing. Stress, Iskall, and I plod down the road, and I once again wonder at how some of the hermits are such excellent builders. One of them must be a landscaper too - the bushes and trees are trimmed to perfection that looks real.

Iskall turns right suddenly, into a white building made from concrete and terracotta. Stress and I follow him through the doors, me wrinkling my nose when the smell of *something* hits me. They must be doing experiments. "DOC!" he roars.

I cringe at the noise, and Stress claps her hands over her ears. Still, it works. The half-human, half-

cyborg - a brilliant work of engineering, if you ask me - sticks his head out of a room down the hallway, a bit of purple smoke coming through the now open door as well. "What do you want, Iskall?" he asks. "And why are Stress and Zak here?"

Iskall opens his mouth, but for once, his words fail him. Stress stares at the ground miserably, and I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I have the virus," I say after a moment. "We have the virus." I point at Stress, who looks like she's going to cry again. I don't blame her.

Doc's eyes go wide.

And then there's chaos. Utter, undeniable chaos.

Stress and I are put in a room with two beds, one in each corner. We both demanded it - I mean, we were both on the same ticking time bomb here. At least we wouldn't be a hundred percent alone. Hermits come in, some of them are shouting, others are screaming, and Stress has her hands over her ears, mumbling something under her breath.

I have to answer the questions. Most of them are repetitive.

*How long do you have?*

Five days.

*Are you sure you have the virus?*

Yes.

To Doc and Cub - *is there a cure yet?*

No.

Questions and questions, until finally Xisuma has enough of it and everyone quiets down. I'm glad for the silence, though the number of people in the room scares me.

He looks at me. "Do your friends know?"

"Yes," I lie.

Xisuma sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I think your boyfriend would be at your side right now, and we'd have even *more* people in this room if they knew." He tilts his head at me. "So I'm going to ask this again - do they know?"

I look away from him, at the wall. "No."

"Zak," Xisuma sighs. "Why?"

"Because it's easier," I mutter. "Instead of worrying about me for five days, they'll worry about me - whenever someone tells them. Hopefully...in four days."

"No...?" X says. "You don't get to do that." He levels a look at me. "Did you like it, in the future?"

I stare at him. "No."

Xisuma shakes his head at me, and turns to False behind him. "Run and tell this *idiot's* village that he's dying," he sighs. False goes wide-eyed, but nods, glancing over at Stress, who has her face buried in her knees, breathing hard. He turns to the rest of the people in the room. "You're stressing

everybody out." This with a meaningful glance at Stress. "Everybody out before someone has a mental breakdown."

There are a few grumbles and groans, but everyone files out except for Iskall, who's sitting next to Stress, looking dejected. Xisuma doesn't even bother to try to get him out before leaving himself, making room for Doc and Cub, who come in and ask us *more* questions, like our blood type and how we feel. After taking our blood, they leave, leaving me in silence.

And I *know* it's not going to be long before my friends come busting the door down much in the same way that the other hermits did. It took me an hour to walk here - I just *know* they'll be here within another, if False gets there quickly.

I already *know* I'm going to regret not telling them. I can't imagine the earful I'm going to get from Darryl and Vincent. I squeeze my eyes shut, nervous about that. They're going to kill me.

Hopefully, that's less painful than dying from the virus.

"What are you laughing about?"

I turn to see Stress watching me snicker softly. "Dying."

Stress stares at me. Iskall stares at me.

"My friends are going to kill me for not telling them," I laugh.

Stress cracks a grin, and starts giggling. Iskall stares at us as if we're crazy, as Stress and I break into loud laughs, me holding my chest as I laugh.

"I thought they'd kill me too," Stress admits, and Iskall gives her a sharp look. She rolls her eyes at him. "Oh, come on. I've been hiding it from you for a day."

Iskall chokes. "You *what*?" he says. "I thought you were like Zak, and just didn't stare in the mirror 24/7."

Stress swats at him. "Don't be rude. I've known for like twenty-five hours or something."

"And you didn't *tell us*?" Iskall asks her.

"Kind of hard to admit that you're dying," I point out. "It *looks* like a bruise."

"But it's not," Doc interrupts, and I nearly fall off the bed I am lying on. Doc gives me a look, holding up his clipboard. "There's something bad in the blood draws we took from them. The closer we get to the...bruise...the more tiny speckles of *something* there is. It's in the blood, and it's spreading fast." He frowns. "I have good news and bad news."

"Good news," I say before anyone else.

"Well, Cub and I - with a bit of help from Scar - can devise a cure."

Iskall frowns. "What's the bad news?"

"It'll take six days."

Iskall leaps off the edge of Stress's bed, the girl looking over at me, sadness shining in her eyes. "*Six days*?"

Doc nods solemnly. "That's if we hurry."

" *They don't have six days left !*" Iskall yells.

Doc doesn't flinch at the severity of his tone. "It's an estimate of the time it's going to take," he says.

"GO FASTER!"

Stress winces, placing her hands over her ears again.

"I can't *go faster* , Iskall," Doc says, finally growing angry. "This is a *cure* for an *apocalyptic* virus!"

"SHE IS GOING TO DIE!" Iskall all but roars, and I look over to see tears leak from the corner of Stress's eyes.

"YOU THINK I DON'T CARE ABOUT HER AS WELL!" Doc yells back. "WE ARE ALL FAMILY, ISKALL!" He takes a breath and lets it out. "I want to save them just as much as the next person."

"GET OUT!" Stress screams, sobbing now, curled in a ball. Iskall and Doc look startled as they look over at her. "GET OUT OF THE ROOM!"

"Stress - " Iskall starts.

Stress looks up at him, tears pouring down her face. "Get out, Iskall. Get out of our room."

They leave, albeit reluctantly. The moment the glass door slams shut, Stress breaks out into sobs.

"I can go too, if you want," I say gently.

"No," she says with a tiny hiccup. "You're fine. We're in this boat together."

"Hey," I say. "Doc seems like a smart person. I'm sure he'll try his hardest to develop the cure faster."

Stress looks over at me, her eyes puffy and bloodshot. "I have the feeling he isn't going to make it."

I tuck my knees to my chest. Doc has a strong front, but I could see the terrified look behind his eye. He's scared. Scared to lose Stress. We're *all* scared. Scared to lose our friends.

And with that thought, a single tear leaks down my cheek.



## knowing that you stayed.

*~Darryl's POV~*

"Have you seen Zak?" I ask Vincent politely, nearly an hour and a half later after he'd fled the house. Mega had stomped out as well, signing things in ASL - which I now wish I understood.

"He ran by me," the french muffin says, still sitting on the grass. "Into the forest. I haven't seen him since."

I shrug. Maybe he needed to have some time to cool off. Hopefully not in the river. I gaze off into the forest, north, where Vincent had pointed.

He's probably fine.

Still, there's a nagging feeling in my chest for my little muffin. He seems like he's the type to keep things secret. But he wouldn't keep them from *me*, right?

*He kept the fact you two dated a secret*, a nasty voice in my head tells me.

*Yeah, well he probably had good reasoning for that*, I argue back. *Maybe he didn't want to ruin our relationship. Maybe he wanted me to confess instead of just shoving our feelings together.* My heart warms at the thought, and I bring a hand up to my lips, remembering our kiss from the morning.

"You're thinking about Zak again, aren't you?" Vincent asks dryly, and I blush at the notion.

"What? I - no - wait - " I stutter out. Vincent chuckles at my plight.

"Relax," the baguette says. "It's okay to be in love."

"Darryl!"

I turn to see a blonde girl walking down the street, a determined, but sad, look on her face. Huh. It's the crazy girl from Hermitville, the one that Zak said traveled to our village and died, along with Xisuma and some guy named...Grain, was it? What was her name...True? No - *False*. Ha.

People in Hermitville have weird names.

"Uh, what's up, False?" I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. "I thought you guys were going to update us on the cure every other day or so."

False sighs. "So you really don't know," I hear her mutter, before she looks back up at us. "There's been...an abrupt development." She hesitates. "Two people have caught the virus. Both five days along."

Vincent stands up next to me, looking horrified. "Oh, shit."

"Language," I tell him. He rolls his eyes at me. I turn back to the blonde-haired girl. "Who is it?"

She hesitates again, and I get the feeling I'm not going to very much like her next words. "Stress."

When she doesn't say another name, Vincent prompts her. "And?"

"And Zak."

"WHAT?" I shriek, causing a few doors to slam open from the nearby houses. Techno and Geo come rushing onto the street, as do Zelk and Mega, the latter signing furiously. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, ZAK'S GONNA DIE!"

"WHAT?" Techno shouts. "ZAK'S GOING TO DIE?"

"ZAK'S GOING TO DIE?" someone else says.

I can only stare at False. My heart feels like it's splitting in two. How could he be infected? He hasn't been near any rivers. Or drinking water from them.

Then I remember his words.

*It can lie dormant in your blood for days, weeks, or months.*

If possible, my heart sinks even further. How? How could this be happening to the one person that I've loved?

"SETTLE DOWN!" Clay screams, and everyone goes silent.

False clears her throat. "Zak has the zombie virus. He came into Hermitville thirty minutes ago with Stress in tow. They both have - " she chokes. " - five - five days left."

I stare at her in horror as chaos fills the street *again* . People are shouting, pushing, screaming their denial, but as False looks up at me, I know she's telling the truth.

"Doc and Cub are currently using them to try to find a cure," she tells me quietly, and nobody besides *maybe* Vincent can hear us. "But it's not good, Darryl. She extends her hand. "We should go."

I reach forward, and take her hand. She drags me through the throng, ignoring the questions tossed her way.

She was sent here to get *us* , I realize - but *me* , most of all.

Seriously, how did everyone think we were dating before we actually were?

*~Zak's POV~*

Stress and I are sleeping - albeit fitfully - when the doors are *thrown open again* , and people spill into the room.

I pull the covers over my head. "Go awayyyyyyy. I'm tryna sleeeeeppppp."

"Zak."

I freeze, my eyes shooting open. Oop. It's Darryl.

Oh god. I'm dreading this moment.

I clear my throat, going for the first thing that comes to mind. Humor. "Zak's not here, you can come back later - "

The blankets whipped off me, and I curl in on myself inadvertently as the cold air hits my body. I crack an eye open to see Techno holding them captive in his arms. "Give it back, pig."

"Zak. You didn't tell us that you were ill." It's Vincent talking this time.

I cringe. "Virus? What virus?"

There's a bit of silence, and Stress coughs awkwardly, wiping away a bit of blood that rolls down her chin. Finn - or Rose, now - sits down on the bed with her, smiling kindly. Stress just looks worried.

"Really, Zak?" Techno says angrily.

"In my defense," I say, putting my hands up, still not looking over at my boyfriend, who's leaning on the side of the bed. "I just found out - " I look up at the clock. "Two hours and fourteen minutes ago. HEY! Fourteen!" I grin proudly at the joke.

"Fourteen memes are not appreciated," Darryl says next to me, and I wince.

"And...the reason you went to Hermitville, instead of telling your friends first, is...?" Geo asks.

"Is..." I trail off. "Uh...I...didn't want you to murder me?"

"Nah," Techno says. "We can let the virus do that."

"Shut up, Techno," Zelk says, elbowing the pink-haired man. "This is not a time for jokes."

"Yes, it is," Techno and I say in unison. He winks at me.

*I knew, Mega signs. I caught him nearly having a panic attack in the bathroom.*

"What'd he say?" Darryl asks, and I open my mouth to answer - but he interrupts me. "No - you translate wrong. Let Zelk do it."

I flinch. Yeah, okay - that was wrong of me.

Zelk clears his throat amidst the awkwardness. "Uh, Mega said that he nearly caught him having a panic attack in the bathroom. He knew that Zak was...ill."

"And you *didn't* say anything?" Darryl demands.

There's another awkward silence.

*I'm mute* , Mega signs.

"Oh. Right." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Darryl blush before his face grows angry again. "And *you* , Zak." I flinch again. "You had to rush off to Hermitville before telling us you were

going to die?"

"I might not die," I pipe up. Hopeful expressions enter those of my friends. "Doc and Cub say that they can devise a cure."

"How long?" Tommy asks curiously.

I shrink. "Uh...six days."

"THAT'S TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TOO LATE!" Darryl hollers. On the bed over, Stress flinches from the noise, and Rose/Finn pats her knee in an attempt to calm her.

I look at him. "Whatever happens happens."

"You're *okay* with it?" Darryl says, and behind his glasses, I can see tears forming in his eyes. "You're okay with *dying*?"

"You forget, Darryl," I say in a low voice. "You forget that in *my* past, *your* potential future, I watch all of you die. If *my* life is the price that needs to be paid to create a cure - so be it. I would rather die a hundred times over than bury you again. I would rather *die* - " I stress the word, and people around me flinch. " - than stab the bodies that you used to inhibit. I would rather *die* than spend my days alone again, knowing that you guys are safe from the apocalypse." I hiss out the final words. "Do you understand?"

Darryl has tears streaming down his face. "Zak, I don't want you to die," he says. "We just got together."

"At least this way I can prevent the apocalypse," I say. "You might not agree with me, Darryl, but I accepted my fate *long* ago. I thought I would die *alone*, with nobody around me. I thought I would join *you* in the ground. I went back in time, and I got to warn you so that *never happens*. The virus lay dormant in my body until now, but at least I got to save you."

"A world without you isn't the world I want," Darryl chokes out, one of his hands reaching out to clutch mine. I squeeze it back.

"A world without me is better than a world where everyone is dead," I say truthfully. "I thought this virus would get to me *long* ago. It finally has - but at least I save you guys."

"That's not fair," Vincent says. "Why do you get to die?"

I look up at him. "Let's hope that Doc and Cub can work faster than they think they can."

Stress is sleeping, Iskall sitting on a chair near her, his head nodding off, snoring slightly. It's nearly midnight, and my friends have been ushered to the mayoral hall, where pillows and blankets were put so they could spend the night.

And the next four nights.

I shiver. "Four more days," I mutter, as the clock hits midnight.

Techno sits on the edge of my bed, looking at me. "How can you be so nonchalant about dying?" he asks me suddenly, lowering his voice so he doesn't wake the other two occupants of the room.

I glance around the room and cross my arms over my chest, wincing as another prickle pains me. Stupid virus. "Honestly? I am scared. But not of dying, Techno. Of what's *beyond* ." I shrug. "Will I see you guys from my timeline again? Or will I be waiting until one of you inevitably dies?" I shrug again. "I don't know."

Techno is silent. "Dang," he says finally. "You must've been *really* bored to listen to my endless rants on orphaned children and philosophy."

I snort. "Don't be too full of yourself, *Technoblade* ." He winces at the use of his ring name. "I was alone for two years, remember? I had a lot of time to think about things."

Techno raises his eyebrows. "Write any books on that stuff?"

I frown. "Not any *good* books. Darryl and I had journals of words, though. Regarding our lives, I mean. I tossed your journal in there as well. Don't worry, I didn't read it." Techno lets out a sigh of relief. "We wrote for hours and hours, gathering information on each person, including a detailed drawing of everything; from their typical clothes to the kind of humor they had." I roll my shoulders, wincing as another spike of pain shoots up my body. It's only been a few hours, but I know the bruise has spread. "When Darryl died, I wrote out his life. And then I buried the books in a chest near the Meeting Hall, and I never touched them again."

"What about you?" Techno asks. "I'm sure you took the opportunity to write great things about yourself." He grins at me, but I don't return it.

"Nah," I say. "I never got around to it. I preferred to remain anonymous. I'm never mentioned in the books, and I crossed out my name in all of Darryl's writings."

"Why?"

"Because I killed you guys," I whisper. "And I didn't want to be remembered as the final survivor. There is another person listed after Darryl...but he's unnamed. And he always will be."

## Because I could not stop just for Death

We had a plan.

We had to have a plan. Even though our friends had agreed to stay out of the room so we wouldn't bite their faces off if we turned into zombies, I knew very well that they wouldn't. Stress knew too.

I mean, *I* hadn't kept my promise to stay outside the room with Mega, Techno, and Darryl, back when they'd died. I knew *very* well they weren't going to.

And I guessed that Stress knew that as well.

We couldn't risk killing one of them.

So we devised a plan, when Darryl wasn't snuggling next to me, and when Doc and Cub weren't constantly taking blood draws from us and measuring our growing bruises.

And at three in the morning, at the end of the sixth day of having the virus - we had around twenty-six hours left - when our arms were shaking from the weakness that lay in our limbs, and when the veins of the virus were creeping up our necks, slowly but steadily creeping towards our brains - we executed it.

It took us nearly four hours in our exhausted state. Our legs could barely support us anymore, though Stress was in a worse condition than I was. Even though the facility was heated, Stress and I both wore fuzzy sweatshirts - mine was Darryl's; he'd let me have his; it was nice and warm - and long pants. Our teeth chattered, and I kept putting my hands between my thighs for warmth.

But we had to do this. Stress and I both agreed we couldn't risk our friends' lives.

So we took my mattress - it wasn't like I was going to be sleeping in it - and shoved it off the bed frame and onto the ground. We took the sheets and covers off of both of the beds and piled them on top of the mattress.

We were always cold.

Then we took my metal bedframe and leaned it against the door as well.

Then we piled Stress's mattress on top of my bed frame, and pushed her bedframe against hers, both of them lining up to go almost perfectly wall to wall. They couldn't push open the door if they *tried*, and I know for a fact that the door was made of glass that was hard as steel.

I made sure it didn't block the food slot, though. Sure, I threw up every meal - but that didn't stop me from eating. Stopped Stress from eating. She looked like she'd lost twenty pounds, but at least she wasn't throwing up like I was. The bucket in the corner smelled atrocious - but it wasn't getting emptied any time soon.

It was nearly seven in the morning when Stress dragged her covers over to the mattress and lay down, her eyes closing instantly. I took mine and lay on the floor next to the mattress. Always the gentleman.

I could almost *hear* Techno laughing at me.

---

We both awoke around an hour later to banging on the door. I poke my head up and see Darryl banging on the glass, shouting angrily. "Leave us alone!" I shout back, and Stress pulls the covers over her head. I notice that the black and purple veins have crept up even higher over her face, and the bruise almost entirely covers her body, down to her forearms and shins. I grimace as I look down at myself. My hands are in a better state - but the darkness goes all the way to my ankles.

"ZAK!" Darryl screams. "YOU OPEN THE DOOR THIS INSTANT, OR I SWEAR TO ALL THE MUFFINS IN THE WORLD - "

"You'll do what?" I ask, curling in on the blankets. I miss his warmth - but I can't put him in danger. The blankets are cold. There isn't enough warmth in here. "Murder me?"

"THIS ISN'T FUNNY, ZAK!" Darryl roars, and when I look up again, I see tears pouring down his face. "LET ME IN!"

"No," I say, and Stress sits up now as well, glaring at my boyfriend. I don't really blame her. It's hard enough as it is to get sleep when you're in pain, and we stayed up making sure they couldn't get in.

"No," Stress echoes softly, and when I look over, her lips are purple and cracked, black veins showing in them. She shivers, and clutches the blankets around her, drawing her knees to her chest.

How many hours do we have left? I look back up at the clock.

Ah. Twenty-one hours, approximately.

"Shut up," I mutter at Darryl, looking away, trying not to cry myself. "This is for your own good."

I blink, and everything goes black. When I next blink, Stress is standing over me, and it's five minutes later. Darryl is still screaming, but now Iskall and Vincent and Xisuma are there, and they're trying to reason with Stress, who's profusely shaking her head.

"You - you good?" she asks, her teeth chattering.

I groan as I sit up, the muscles nearly tearing in two - or that's what it feels like. "Yeah. A virus won't kill me."

Stress cracks a grin, but she shivers, closing her eyes. I swear they flash violet before they return to their normal brown.

"Zak," I hear Darryl sob, and it nearly breaks me. But I can't. I can't endanger him. He has to live.

This time around, I will make *sure* he survives. Stress wraps her arms around her waist, wincing, and I toss her one of my blankets. It's even colder, now, but I'll just steal them back when she passes. *Wow, I'm heartless.*

Because by the look of it, she's going to die within nineteen hours. Maybe twenty.

"Yo!" I ask, causing the conundrum outside in the hallway to fall silent. "Do you have any paper?"

"Will you open the door if we give you paper?" Vincent asks.

"No," Stress and I say in unison.

"Then no," Vincent says. I stare him down.

We get the paper, and two pencils.

I hand one to Stress, and around half of the stack of paper. She smiles gratefully, and bends over to scrawl a name at the top.

Eventually, after we ignore them for a while, the people in the hallway stop screaming at us. What can they do? The walls are made of metal, and the glass is infused with metal as well. They're not getting in anytime soon.

Cub stops by, and he just gives us a sad look, not even bothering to tell us to stop barricading the door. He tells us that there's some good news. The cure will be made within the day - at least twenty hours.

I don't have the heart to tell him that Stress and I have barely nineteen hours left.

Eventually, we finish our letters to our friends - our goodbye letters - and stuff them in a corner with each of their names written on top.

And now...we have to wait. Sixteen hours left. I don't even know what time of day it is.

"Truth or dare?" I ask Stress hesitantly.

She laughs, scratching at the vein that's nearly at the corner of her eye. "Dare." Her eyes sparkle. We're doing our best to remain hopeful in this horrible time. Perhaps Cub and Doc will get through to us.

"I dare you - "

"Zak!"

I look over in fake annoyance, to see Techno crouching at the window. "Do you want to play with us, or something?"

Techno shakes his head, all trace of humor gone from his face. "I need to speak with you."

I look at Stress, and she shrugs. I sigh and crawl over to Techno. My feet no longer support me - the muscles have all but deteriorated. When I finally reach the door, and my face is near the food slot, and I'm panting, I stop. "What."

"Zak," Techno says softly. "What you're doing to Darryl isn't good."

"I'm saving him," I say in annoyance. "He can't be attacked."

"What you're doing," Techno says angrily. "Is stopping him from being with you in your last moments."

"At least he won't get his face bitten off by a zombie," I retort. "I'm scared of that."

"And what about you?" Techno asks me. "His worst fear is coming true. *You are dying*, Zak. And he can't be there with you."

"It's for his own good."

"Now you're just being selfish," Techno replies. "Just because it happened to Nick doesn't mean



it'll happen to you. We'll *all* be in there with you and Stress. You're not going to kill anybody."

"I can't risk it," I say.

Techno rolls his eyes. "At least talk to him through here," he says, patting the food slot. "It's not fair to him."

I sigh again. "Fine."

Techno looks over my head at Stress. "And you. If you're not going to allow others into the room, you're going to talk to your friends through the food slot as well." I don't even see Stress nod before he stands up and stalks off.

Mega appears first. He stares down at me from his standing position, in my curled blankets. Slowly, he kneels down to my level. His fingers flew at a quick pace, my tired eyes barely keeping track of them.

*Hi, loser.*

I smile back. My fingers are too tired to sign, and I'm using them to keep me propped up. "Hey, mute."

*Heard you're dying.*

"Yeah, well, you know rumors." I got to chuckle, but I cough up blood into my hands, inconspicuously rubbing them onto my sheets. He totally didn't see that. He also totally doesn't see the red stains littered all over our blankets. "Only a bit of truth in them."

Mega hesitates before responding. *How long do you have?*

I glance up at the clock. "Fifteen and a half." I chuckle. "So close to fourteen."

I almost see Mega smile, the corner of his mouth twisting up into a smile. *You suck, dude.*

"No, you."

*No, you .*

"I wish you were in here," I say. "I'd totally beat you in a 1v1, even in my condition." I part the blankets to reveal the black and purple bruises littering my body, and I see Mega wince.

He quickly recovers. *No, you wouldn't. You suck at everything.*

I snort. "As if."

Talking with him is normal. It feels nice to have one person that doesn't act as if I'm a china doll. Or that I'm dying. Which I'm totally not.

Okay, maybe I am.

But as Mega leaves, he presses a hand against the glass, and sighs the letter *F* . I smirk and shake my head, signing *F* right back at him.

Yeah. Perhaps there was a reason that I put a giant *YOU SUCK* in his letter. That and *love ya buddy* . *Don't worry, I'm sure you'll join me in the afterlife soon. Though you'll be in hell. I'll laugh at you from heaven.*

I switch places with Stress, and try not to watch as False and Cleo huddle close up the glass door, talking in quiet whispers. It ends in a lot of tears, which Stress is severely lacking; as she mostly just chokes up blood, even from her nose. I try not to listen to their conversation, but it has something to do with *girl power* and *ice queens*. Whatever that means.

And so our day continues. We switch spots, and have quarter-hour conversations with each of our friends, sometimes two at a time. George, Sapnap, and Clay all end up crying at the end of our fifteen minutes, blubbering about love and some other stuff.

I'm glad they're happy.

I really, truly am.

*Four hours left.*

Stress looks horrible as she converses with Iskall. She looks so pale, and her hair has started to fall out as she touches it nervously. Her voice has changed as well, and she barely talks. In the end, she reaches through the food slot and grips her purple hand in Iskall's. The man might only have one eye, but he's sure crying enough to make it two.

They all beg. All of them. To open the door, to let them in - but every time, we say no. Even as our resolve fails.

"Hello, muffin."

I'm sure my vision is failing. Stress's eyes are purple now, and she claims she can't see out of her left eye. I think she has around two hours left. I think I might have three. It's a bit harder to determine when it's yourself.

I look up blearily, my cheek resting on the floor next to the food slot. It's Darryl, crouching by the door, his eyes clear of tears, for once, though sadness shines in his beautiful green eyes.

"Hello...baldy," I manage out.

"Hey! Don't call me that, you muffin," Darryl says, and I swear I can hear a sniffle in his voice. His voice is smaller as he says, "Are you okay?"

"Just muffiny," I say, using one of his catchphrases. I turn away as I cough up more blood, wincing as it lands on the floor. Stress throws me a sympathetic look from where she's curled up, weaving flowers from a stack that Xisuma had given her.

"You certainly *do not* look fine," Darryl returns.

I chuckle weakly, wiping the blood off my face with the back of my hand. "Yeah, that's kind of what dying does to you."

Darryl looks horrified. "Would you please stop joking about that?"

"But it's *funny*," I whine.

"No, it's not," Darryl snuffles, and this time I *do* see tears in his eyes.

"Darryl."

I squint to see Doc and Cub standing there, holding a small orange vial. Darryl leaps to his feet. "Is that...?" my boyfriend trails off, looking at the tiny vial.

"Yes," Cub says. "But we only have one."

"Give it to Stress," I say.

"Give it to Zak," she says at the same time. I throw a glare at her, and she glares right back. Her purple eyes are making me uneasy. "You saved the world."

"But you don't deserve to die," I reply, trying to force anger in my voice. All I end up with is a nosebleed.

Outside the glass door, Cub, Doc, and Darryl shuffle uneasily. They don't know what to do. To agree with one of us would be disagreeing with the others, and I doubt they want to do that. Though I can tell that the sides are clear.

I hold out my hand under the food slot. "Give it to me." I see hesitation enter Doc's eyes.

And so, hoping that he can understand sign language, I sign a few words to him. Darryl narrows his eyes at me, but doesn't say a word.

Understanding fills his eyes, and he kneels down and puts the vial in my hands. It takes a bit of effort to grasp it, but I withdraw my hand.

"Go on, muffin," Darryl whispers. "Use it."

I ignore him and crawl back over to Stress, who eyes me warily. "I just want to thank you," I say honestly. "I don't want you to be ill, Stress. I'm sorry I didn't come back in time early enough."

She smiles sweetly, as I know she would. "It's fine, Zak," she says, reaching out her hand and taking my left. I can't even feel the cut that Clay had to stitch up anymore. My entire body hurts. "Save yourself. You deserve to be selfish once in a while."

I stare at the tiny vial in my hand, and notice that it's a needle. I need to press the back of it for the needle to inject.

Commotion in the hallway.

Shouts.

"There's a *cure*?"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THERE'S ONLY ONE?"

"Who has it?"

Stress and I ignore them, even as they clammer, some telling me to use it, others silent. It's still in my outstretched hand, Stress's hand clutched tightly in mine, a small, sad smile on her face. Everything falls silent.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

I look up at the clock.

*One hour.*

I look over at the hallway, where hopeful faces - some my friends, others my acquaintances - have their faces pressed against the glass.

"I'm sorry, Stress," I say. I press the button on the needle, and it extends, a tiny drop of orange fluid.

Everything is silent.

"It's okay, Zak," she whispers. "Save yourself."

I take a deep breath.

And I turn the needle and I ram it into the heart.

*Her* heart.

## He kindly stopped for me

*[Heh. Fitting, isn't it. Chapter 14.]*

*~Darryl's POV~*

I'm horrified as I watch my boyfriend take the cure and ram it straight into the heart of his sick roommate. Cries fill the hallway, but I just bang my palm against the glass, tears forming in my eyes.

Stress's mouth forms a perfect o, as she looks down at the vial embedded in her chest. Zak tugs it out, and he won't look at me.

I realize why he hasn't looked at me. Because this was his plan all along. That stupid little muffin. Too selfless.

I see Zak catch her as she falls to the side, orange flowing along the black veins that *just* reach her temples. I can see the cure working along every part of her body, minus her fingertips, where the virus doesn't touch. Her eyes flash brown, then back to purple. She shakes in Zak's arms, even as he holds her.

Iskall bangs against the glass next to me.

And then...the orange fades.

Stress takes another shuddering breath.

The virus still exists under her skin. I can see the veins as they reach her brain, and her eyes shoot open - still a brilliant purple. She whispers words to Zak, my boyfriend, who stares at her, horrified.

"I don't understand," Doc mutters from next to me. "That should have worked."

Zak takes Stress's hand, a small smile on his face, and he says something back to her that I don't understand. She reaches a hand up and turns her head, pointing at the door. He nods.

And then her hand drops.

And a tiny trail of blood makes its way down her chin.

And she doesn't move.

Doesn't breathe. Her chest doesn't rise and fall.

Her purple eyes, fading back to brown, stare at nothingness. Zak still holds her, and we all wait with bated breath to see if she turns into a zombie.

But she doesn't.

She's dead.

*Dead* dead.

We're all horrified.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Zak looks up at us, at the doorway, and his eyes are filled with tears. He reaches over and closes Stress's eyes before returning his gaze to us. I realize his eyes are purple as well. He lifts an unsteady hand and signs three careful words that I don't understand.

"I love you," Zelk mutters under his breath. A translation of Zak's signing. Something meant for *me* . I know it. Zak even meets my eyes, his own once-brown orbs shining purple.

And then he falls.

He *falls* .

I thought he had an hour more than Stress. I thought he would make it. I thought he would use the cure. I thought so much, and looked so little.

But his body folds down next to his roommate, and I see the veins reach his temple.

I scream. I clutch at my head and scream, and suddenly there are yells and tears and shrieks around me, as if I've broken the barrier that stopped everyone from talking. Stopped the deathly silence that permeated the air.

And I see the moment his life fades from his eyes.

He's beautiful. Even with veins over his face, even with blue lips and a nosebleed - he's beautiful. He's my *love* . I love him.

And he's dead.

I fall to my knees, banging on the door as his eyes close one final time. My heart feels as if it's ripping in two.

*No. No...my little muffin can't be dead. He* can't.

But he is. There is no one to close his eyes, no one to close his eyes and fake it that *maybe* he's just sleeping, because Stress looks like she is.

Zak doesn't even come back to life as a zombie.

Neither of them do. Part of me selfishly wants him to, just so I can see him stand one more time. I would gladly hug him, even if he ripped my throat out in the process. Just to see him *move* one more time.

The glass shatters, and a large chunk of it enters my forehead, resulting in a sharp, stabbing pain to my head. I know it's going to scar. I know I probably should get it checked. But I don't care.

Not as I stumble over to Zak, to the boy I love.

Not as I cradle him in my arms.

Not as I cry, with tears dripping down onto his lifeless body.

Not as I hold him.

One last time.

---

*Dear Darryl,*

*If ur reeding this, im dead lol. i know - i shouldn't be laughing. But if we're married, and u find this, just know that i rote this letter shortly before I expekted to turn into a zombie and eat ur face off. Hopfully. hehe jk*

*i rote ur letter last. i had to. dont worry, im sure this one has the best speling.*

*Don't worry, there's some love left for u ;)*

*Darryl, if ur reeding this, and im not there, i want you to know that i love u. i want u to stay in that world, and die of old age or something - or replace me, idc. Look, i know you think that i can never be replaced - and ur right, ofc. There will never be anybody like me. im*

~~*unicke*~~

~~*you nikue*~~

~~*youniq*~~

*speshal. Techno's the engliche magor, not me. anywho, i love u, Darryl. i will always love u. ur the best moments of my life, and i wish i had more tyme with u. i wish i could hold you in my arms one laste tyme.*

*But i couldnt let u die. not like the last tyme. i couldn't live with myself if i axeidentally killed u. that would suck.*

*u better buri me with cheezy frys. and i better be grave number fourteen. ill sue if im nto. no serious9a i;l awidue if im not number fiyewhanef greave that woyasod suck yiu dknow how mucha i luv the numebr sofuurtene.*

*i dont think those last few sentances were very good. I had to ask stress how to spell sentances. is this gud enouff?*

*luv,*

*Zak Ahmed*

*ur boyfriend*

*P.S*

*since im dead am i still considered ur boyfriend???? or am i ur ex? idk...guess thats ur first*

*breakup, lol.*

*P.P.S*

*...i love u with all my heart darryl. ur the best person in the world. dont lose urself because of my death. <3*

*P.P.P.S*

*i wrote u a song. i have nothing else to do in this prison thing that i put myself into. it's attached. u better sing it. even tho ur bad at singing.*

*P.P.P.P.S*

*did i mention i luv u? U are my world. My lyfe. My hopes, my dreems...everything i have ever dun has been 4 u.*

---

But to Darryl, a world without Zak wasn't a world at all.

He held the messy letter in his palms; the one the love of his life had written for him, just in case the cure didn't make it. Around him, his friends and Stress's friends sat with their letters too. They all had one. Each and every one.

They were all crying.

Sobbing over their friends.

Because Stress and Zak were gone. Dead.

The virus had killed them.

And nothing would ever bring them back.

Darryl took a deep breath, trying to be rational about this. But he *couldn't* be rational...not in a world without Zak. He was falling apart. *They* were falling apart.

And he wondered how Zak had possibly lived through the death of *all* of his friends. How the sadness hadn't killed him. How much pain he carried. Darryl was a mess from Zak's death...but what if *everyone* in the room here was dead? He glanced around, noting the loss on everyone's faces. Complete silence, except for a few sniffles and sobs. Dreary and disbelief from the loss of two people who should never have died.

Zak had only been gone a few hours.

But already Darryl's heart had been torn in two. Zak had told him to find someone else to fill that gap.

But who would *ever* fill the gap that Zak had created? Who would ever be cute enough, happy enough, stupid - in some occasions - enough - to *ever* replace the boy he loved?

Nobody ever would.



And that was that.

## The carriage held but just ourselves

I died. I *remember* dying. It hurt. A lot. I remember the cure not working, I remember Stress dying.

Where am I?

I look up to see that I'm curled in my bed. *What?*

I look out the window, and my heart sinks. I'm in the village. The one from the future. I scramble to my feet, looking down at my body.

I'm wearing Darryl's sweatshirt, with armor over it. At the side of the bed are two swords, shiny and gleaming.

My breath comes in short gasps. *No. No, that can't possibly have been a dream. No. No way.*

I scurry to the bathroom.

The mirror is whole. Not a crack from when I punched it. Just me, five years older, with scruffy hair and scars on my face from when I've gotten scratched by zombies.

*No. That can't have been a dream.*

"NO!" I shriek.

I hope that someone hears me and comes. That I wasn't dreaming, that I'm not in some sick hell.

But I wait, and nobody comes.

And slowly I realize that nobody's coming. That there are cobwebs in places where there weren't before, and the tiles were chipped. Darryl wouldn't ever have let the floors get like this.

"I wasn't dreaming," I tell myself, looking up and staring at my brown eyes. Slowly, I lift up my shirt. Not a mark there. Not a black dot. No sign of any virus.

"I wasn't dreaming."

"No, Zak Ahmed," a voice says. "No, you weren't."

I jump a spin, turning to face a woman with brown hair leaning on a scythe. She wears black robes, but her eyes are a brilliant green, just like Darryl's. My heart pangs, and I grasp for the memory of his eyes, his voice. I won't forget them. Not like last time. "Wha - who are you?" I gasp out.

She tilts her head at me. "My name is Elaine. But you can call me the Soul Weaver." She sweeps her scythe through the air - luckily nowhere near me - leaving a trail of light behind. "I sent you forward through time."

"So I wasn't dreaming," I breathe out.

Elaine smiles at me. "No, Zak, you were not."

I frown at her. "So why kill me afterward?"

Elaine's smile fades. "I had no intention of that. That wasn't supposed to happen." She mutters something to herself, before her smile returns tenfold, though it looks a bit forced. "I have a proposition for you, Zak."

"Stop saying my name like that," I say, annoyed. "It sounds weird."

Elaine rolls her eyes, leaning her chin on the blunt part of her scythe. her ropes wave around her, even though there is no wind in the house. "I can send you back."

I perk up. "Ye - wait. What are the consequences?"

"None."

"You're joking."

Elaine shrugs. "I enjoy happy endings. The zombie apocalypse was forced upon this world by a rival of mine." She scrunches her nose. "I intend to fix that problem."

I nearly accept, but then I hesitate. "What about Stress?"

Elaine smiles sadly. "She's in the afterworld, waiting to be sorted."

"Can she come back with me?" I ask hopefully.

"No, Zak Ahmed," Elaine says sternly. "I may not bring you back in one piece. Your memories, and two years of your life, will be forfeit."

"Done," I say without hesitation.

Elaine looks surprised, but she closes her eyes and murmurs a few words. From her scythe flows a glow of white light, and that light forms into a shape, and finally into a figure - and then into the brown-haired girl who helped me plot against my friends.

She blinks at me. "Z - Zak? There was this lady with angel wings, and she told me I could enter, but then I felt a sucking, and now I'm here - "

"Now, now," Elaine interrupts. "I would allow you to converse, but the amount of power my scythe is drawing - " she shakes her head. " - I must hurry."

She waves her scythe in the air, and I feel lightheaded.

*"Forget."*

---

S claps excitedly, turning her hair in her hands; a common habit of hers. "Nice job, Z!" she says excitedly, readying her hand on the piano. "Whoever wrote this song is a true artist."

I smile, inclining my head in her direction.

I'd appeared in this random world with S at my side - I didn't know her real name, just the letter *S* - in this stupid world. At least we had each other. Best friends and all that.

And there were lots of reading materials. There were hundreds of journals and books in two different scripts; one in a neat, cute one, and one in a messy, nearly unreadable one. But it told us so much about this village. About what had happened.

There were graves located around the central plaza, all of them listed in the books; time and date of death included. The last person to die was the boy with the neat handwriting, a boy named Darryl. The other one was never mentioned by name.

I thought it was kind of lonely. But I was pretty sure he'd been in love with Darryl. The love poem on the boy's grave shows that. He died on December third, 2023, apparently.

I wonder what happened to his boyfriend. If he had died from the mysterious zombie virus as well. Luckily, the disease must've died out - S and I never caught it.

We read all the journals listed. It was odd, reading the life stories and private journals of the people long dead. S and I don't remember how we got and here, but we must be here for a purpose.

Though, in the past two years - according to the calendar, it's October 31st, 2027 - we've grown quite bored. I didn't learn how to use the two swords that lay on one of the beds, but the sweatshirt lying next to them; black and red, gave me a sense of peace.

In one of the journals, there were hundreds of songs written out. I hadn't been a good singer when I'd started out, but now S has said that I would win all the awards if anyone else was here. I've been practicing for two years, and S learned to play the piano, following along on the note music.

We'd traveled away from the village a few times but always ended up back here. Once, we hit another village at the base of some mountains, but it was abandoned and had graves in one of the clearings near it. I felt quite bad for the people who'd died there. I couldn't find as much information there, besides a few notebooks from someone named *Captain Angry Eyes*, and a guy named *Poultry Man*. Whatever that meant. The people in Hermitville were weird.

It's apparently Halloween, today. We'd read in neat-handwriting-boy's journal that on that day, people dressed up in costumes and got candy from people in their village and others. So we'd shifted through trunks and chests of clothing until we'd found the costumes we liked, even if there was no one to collect candy from - it was nice, celebrating a holiday that nobody else was around to celebrate. Stress wore a witch costume; purple and black, with a slightly-askew hat and a veil that fell over her face, making her face nearly unrecognizable. I wore a grim reaper costume, with a black robe and a white skull mask covering everything but my mouth, except for the face.

"From the top?" S says with a grin, stretching her neck from side to side. The only piano there is is one behind the central meeting area - called Meeting Hall, by one of the journals in the mysterious boy's handwriting. There's a door near it that leads to the stage area, where a microphone and speaker box is set up. Surprisingly, the microphones work, and though we can't hook up the piano, we *can* hook a microphone to the piano, which makes S's beautiful music play inside Meeting Hall.

Once upon a time, I wonder if people gathered here to listen to others play music, though there are no other signs of instruments.

The wind starts to pick up around us, as S starts the first few notes of the song the mysterious boy wrote in his journal after his boyfriend died. I stumble, and S lets out a small yelp as the world goes black around me, and when I blink -

And I'm standing *inside* Meeting Hall, and S's piano music is still playing over the speakers, and I have my microphone in hand, but she's not next to me. There's someone on the stage in front of me, and there are dozens of people in the audience.

The boy on the stage in front of me is dressed in a black and red robe, with two swords at his side, and a mask kind of like mine, except it has glowing white eyes. But on his head, there is a halo, and it makes him look sweeter, instead of the scary monster thing he's dressed up as.

I look around, and notice that Meeting Hall is different. The windows aren't cracked, and the floor isn't covered in scrabs. Cobwebs don't hang in the corners. *Where am I?*

There are *people* in the audience. Real people. This can't possibly be the apocalyptic world that was all I've ever known. This had to be a vision, or something.

The boy looks surprised as S's music flies over the speakers, but he brings the microphone up to his mouth.

***[Before we start this epic duet, I would just like to say that this song is "How Long Will I Love You" by Ellie Goulding. It's the song that Zak 'wrote' in his journal, and the one he wrote in his note to Darryl. The boy on the stage's words are on the right side; our main character's the left side.]***

*How long will I love you?*

*As long as stars are above you.*

*And longer, if I can.*

I can't help myself, as the boy on the stage hesitates in his next words. I know this song. It's the song that the messy-handwriting-boy wrote in his journal after the boy named Darryl (neat-handwriting-boy) died. I step onto the stage, ignoring the eyes that turn to me as I do so. I lift the microphone to my mouth and sing the words I know so well.

*How long will I need you?*

*As long as the seasons need to*

*Follow their plan.*

The boy on the stage turns to me as I near him, and I can't see his eyes behind the mask, but I'm imagining them in my head - beautiful and green, like grass. S's piano music continues playing, and I wonder if she notices I'm gone. Probably not. She often gets lost in her world of music.

*How long will I be with you?*

*As long as the sea is bound to*

*Wash upon the sand.*

*How long will I want you?*

*As long as you want me to*

*And longer by far.*

The boy with the halo is nearing me, now, his next words echoing in the quiet air of the meeting hall. I wonder if he's just a vision, or if, to him, *I'm* the vision, *I'm* not real. But I'm too lost in the song to care.

*How long will I hold you?*

*As long as your father told you,*

*As long as you can.*

*How long will I give to you?*

*As long as I live through you*

*However long you say.*

*How long will I love you?*

*As long as stars are above you*

*And longer if I may.*

The last lyrics of the words pop into my head, and I hesitate for a brief second, before I see the lips of the taller boy turn into a soft smile, and we both sing at the same time.

*How long will I love you?*

*As long as stars are above you.*

We both finish in silence, staring at each other. The boy with the halo brings his microphone to his side, staring at me.

"Who are you?" he whispers.

I open my mouth to answer, but S's excited yell cuts through everything.

"Z! Nice job!"

I turn to see her climbing up the stairs, rushing towards me. She hits me, and hugs me, and I laugh, and straighten her witch hat, which has nearly fallen off. "Thanks, S."

S smiles, but her eyes go wide as she sees everyone around us, and the boy who stands next to me on the stage. Her jaw drops, and she sidles behind me, despite being only an inch shorter than me. "Where are we?" she whispers.

"I don't know," I whisper back. "Maybe you finally went crazy?"

"No," S whispers back. " *You* went crazy, and dragged me into this dreamscape."

"What do we do?" I hiss.

"I don't know," she says back. "I have social anxiety."

"No, you can't just take words from a journal," I point out in a low voice. "You have no one to be social around beside me. You can't have social anxiety."

The boy next to me coughs, and I turn to him. "You - you, uh, do realize that we can hear every word you're saying?" He seems to be trying not to laugh.

"Oh," I say, my face going red under the mask. S laughs behind me. "Whoops." I wave at the still crowd. "Hi. I'm Z."

"And I'm S," S giggles from behind me. "Pleased to meet you."

"Pretty sure they're happier to meet me," I tease.

She huffs. "My piano music was better than *your* singing."

I grab her hat off her head and throw it at her, bouncing off her chest as she huffs at me. Her hair looks like a rats nest, and she straightens it with her fingers, glaring at me. I laugh, and she jumps at me and grabs my mask, prying it off my face. I yelp as the strap holding it to my head snaps, and S cheers, throwing it to the side.

"Payback!"

Heads snap in her direction, as she pushes me away when I try to jump at her again.

"Stress?" the boy from behind me says.

I turn towards him, and S finds the opportunity to yank my hood off my head. "Who's stressed? Not me."

His eyes go wide as he sees me, and then he reaches up and pulls back his hood, revealing light brown hair and green eyes. He has a dented white scar on his forehead, and part of me wonders how he got that. It must've hurt. He stands, as if expecting something, and then when I don't move,

his eyes soften. "Zak?"

I look at S, who looks confused. "Is that what Z stands for?"

S sniffs. "My name can't *possibly* be Stress," she says. "It's probably yours."

"Zak is a guy's name!" I say.

"Don't be sexist," she shoots back. "It could stand for Zakira, or Zakiya, or something pretty like that." I think she's joking, though.

"Zak?" the boy with the pretty green eyes whispers, and I turn back to him. He's cute. Taller than me. I could -

What the hell was I going to think next? Certainly not anything PG. *Uh-uh. Brain, don't go there.* "Do I know you?" I manage to choke out.

The boy with the green eyes steps closer. "I'm Darryl, Zak. Don't you remember me?"

"Uh - " I say, turning back to S - or Stress, I guess. " - you mean the guy that died? Darryl Noveschosh?"

His eyes brighten. "Yes! Yes, that's me!"

"But you're dead," Stress points out.

"Don't be rude," I tell her. "He's very nice looking for a dead person."

Someone in the crowd coughs, which reminds me of their existence. "Anyway, if you guys aren't dead - " I say, waving broadly towards Darryl and the crowd. "Then where did I come from?"

Darryl's eyes go to one of the people in the stands - one wearing a reindeer onesie. "I don't know. Zak." He says the name - *my* name - reverently as if I'm a piece of breakable glass that needs to be put in its own cupboard. "What year is it?"

"2027," Stress and I say at the same time.

"He's from the alternate future," a monotone voice calls out. "The one where Zak...0.5...was from. You know, the future where we *didn't* find a cure?"

"Oh," Darryl says. "But what about her?" he points to Stress. "She's dead in that future."

A bright shape makes an appearance next to me, and I shield my eyes from the shining light that threatens to burn my eyeballs out. When I'm finally able to open them without frying my orbs, a woman stands there, holding a much cooler scythe than the one that went with my costume. She has brown hair and light green eyes, so unlike Darryl's. Why am I thinking about the halo boy's eyes? That's kind of creepy.

But, I mean, he's hot. I'd hit that. Wait - no -

"Hello, Zak," she says smoothly, interrupting my train of thoughts. Probably for the better.

"Have we met?" I ask her.

She smiles softly. "Yes. After you died."



"I think I would *remember* dying," I point out.

She shakes her head. "You do not. You were supposed to return earlier, to this world." She gestures around. "You made a deal with me to give up your memories, and your time away from your friends, for *her* ." She points at Stress, who's staring at her in awe, and leans on her scythe. "Welcome back to the world you belong in, Zak Ahmed."

"Wait!" I say as the woman turns to go. "Will I ever get my memories back?"

"No," the woman says, slicing through every thread of hope I had. "But you have your friend back. You made the choice, not me. I merely executed it." She smiles. "Welcome back to 2023, Zak."

And with another flash of light, she's gone.

I blink again, turning back towards the crowd. One of the boys, costumeless, is holding up a sign that says *YOU SUCK* on it.

Everybody is silent, even S, for once. People in the crowd are half out of their seats, a surprised/amazed/heartbroken look on their faces. It's very confusing as some of them hesitate, probably wondering whether or not to come up onto the stage.

I clear my throat again.

"So. You got any cheesy fries? Thin-crust pizza?"

## and immortality.

Darryl and I aren't dating. I know he wants to...but I'm not ready for it. I don't know him enough, and he knows me too well.

And since the messy journal writer - *me* , apparently - never wrote about his own life, they have to explain everything to me. Apparently, Mega is mad that I don't know sign language.

Seriously. Why would I know sign language?

Oh, right. Because I supposedly traveled back in time once before, in the time where everyone was dead, and back to 2020, before the apocalypse broke out.

And I did it again - in 2027, back to 2023. At this point I don't even think it's time travel; I'm traveling to a different past. A past where *I* saved everyone.

And S and I died because of it. We were both sick hours before the cure came along - and the cure that *did* come along didn't work.

We'd both died.

It felt odd, knowing you had a grave.

Though, I wasn't the only one. S had two. One back in 2027 - I can't believe we made fun of that grave, only to find out it was *her* name - and one here. And the rest of our friends had one back in 2027 as well.

The hermits are overjoyed to see S. Apparently, she's part of a village called Hermitville. She only recently agreed to go back there, but she comes back to my village every other day. It's a bit odd, having a past that everyone knows about except you.

Doc and Cub apologized to S and I for not making a working cure. They said they blamed themselves for S's death. I don't really. I mean, it's hard enough trying to find a cure for a virus that could kill the whole world. But trying to do it within a limited number of days, so your friends don't die? It's no wonder the 'cure' didn't succeed the first time around.

Also, thin-crust pizza is the best. Even *S* wrinkles her nose when I mention it. Why does everyone hate it, except the french baguette, - at least that's who he was introduced by Darryl as - Vincent, and I.

And cheesy fries are just plain gross. How could I have *possibly* liked them?

All of my friends are patient with me. Techno is trying to teach me to use a sword again. Mega is attempting to teach me sign language - that is, if he wasn't cursing me out using his board every five seconds. George, Clay, and some guy named SnapMap - although he tells me not to call him that, Clay and George say *to* call him that - are trying to teach me how to fit in with society again. As best as they can without bursting out laughing. Apparently, I got Clay and George to start dating. That makes me feel better.

Geo is trying to teach me to go parkour. I suck at parkour.

S and some of the other hermits visit every fourth day. I go to visit them every second day. She says she feels at home as well, though I know that we'll always be friends. Apparently, her friends -

two girls named Cleo and Stress, and a guy named Iskall - are reteaching the things she used to know. She showed me her old place; a white concrete mushroom house topped with a pink roof. It's so *her* that I can believe we used to live in this world.

I don't recognize this place, but I feel at home here. Even if I think my singing sucks.

Darryl says he loves my singing. He says he loves me, though he respects my boundaries, and said that he won't date me if I don't want to.

Often, I catch myself looking at him.

He's cute. He calls people muffins a lot. He shouts *LANGUAGE!* at people who swear. He has this annoying habit of running a hand through his hair.

Am I in love with him?

No. Not yet.

*Could* I see myself with him one day?

Definitely.

### ***THE END***

**Yep. We finally did it :). Weeks and months of planning - no, just kidding. I started on June 24th or so, and wrote it bit by bit - until the first of July, when I really got into the story and wrote it all out until it was nine in the morning. Whoops.**

**Thank you to all my wonderful readers! You guys are the sweetest! Look out for my other fics!**

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!